

# Reviving Boro: The Transcultural Reconstruction of Japanese Patchwork

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Leren Li

Date: 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2020

## Abstract

This thesis investigates *boro* as a revived cultural phenomenon, one that physically originated in Japan but that has been conceptually defined by other cultures. It excavates the layers of value and meaning embedded in *boro* as a result of making, collecting, exhibiting and design activities in order to reveal how and why people have begun to appreciate *boro* within a range of different cultural, spatial and social contexts. In doing so, this research challenges the existing literature documenting *boro*'s origins and authenticity and reveals the forces at play behind the transformation of *boro* from folk craft to the practice of contemporary art, design and fashion.

Born out of necessity, *boro* combines materials, techniques and aesthetics that are rooted in Japanese mending culture and textile traditions. Drawing on Michael Thompson's Rubbish Theory, the research demonstrates how, as *boro*'s functional value has decreased in the contemporary context, new values have been re-ascribed to it through its continued transcultural production in diverse contexts, in which *boro* has adopted a range of different roles from antique object and example of textile practice to vintage fashion style, a concept promoting sustainability, inspiration for creative practice and cultural symbol. This research critically evaluates these dimensions of the process of value creation through studies of personal and museum *boro* collections, new *boro* fashion design and recent *boro* practices of independent crafters.

The return of *boro* in the global art and design landscape raises questions about how a revived phenomenon is translated in today's diverse contexts and makes a special claim for *boro*'s original culture, how it communicates in other cultural spaces and how these are understood and reproduced in new possibilities. This thesis positions *boro* within a global context, demonstrating how the co-creation of meanings and values has developed through cultural connections and subsequent interpretations.

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## **Definitions/Abbreviations**

Regarding the Japanese names, this thesis follows the Japanese convention that surnames precede forenames. The transliteration of Japanese words is done according to conventions of romanisation with macrons on long vowels.

The full names of the following institutions are given their first appearance in this thesis. On all subsequent references only the acronyms are employed.

BIFT	Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum, London
MOCFA	The Museum of Craft & Folk Art, San Francisco
CAFAM	Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles



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## Introduction

This thesis explores the Japanese cultural phenomenon of *boro*, both within Japan and internationally, by focusing on its origin stories and development and its reinterpretations in the fields of contemporary art and design. *Boro* signifies a class of Japanese textiles that have been extensively mended and patched together. The history of *boro* dates back to the late Edo period (1603–1868): the Tokugawa Shogunate started improving the waste disposal system in around 1649, which led to a flow of discarded resources from the city to the countryside. With the Meiji Restoration, Japan enjoyed social prosperity fostered by strong economic growth, artistic innovation, technical breakthroughs and political modernisation. Most Japanese no longer needed to repair their clothes, and because of this *boro* became less necessary, and even a shameful object for some people, as it was evidence of a family history of poverty.<sup>1</sup> This disdain for *boro* in Japan lasted until the late twentieth century, when Japanese collectors reconstructed the meaning and value of *boro* as both collectable antiques that reflected “Japanese aesthetics” and as ethnographic objects that recorded the history of folk culture.

In October 2019, Tatsumi Kiyoshi, the director of Tokyo’s Amuse Museum, gave a presentation at the conference “Design of Sustainable Concepts from the International Perspective”, at Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology (BIFT), entitled “Boro, Amuse Museum and Tanaka Chuzaburo”.<sup>2</sup> At this event, Tatsumi presented *boro* as part of a narrative about Japanese history and recycling as a Japanese way of life. He discussed the fact that recycling activity in Japan dated back to the nineteenth century, as a result of the Japanese government’s refuse disposal policy and traditional Japanese social hierarchy. To demonstrate the pressure that Japan was facing to deal with problem of waste, Tatsumi provided a

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Austin, “Threadbare: The Social History of Japanese *Boro*”, *Selvedge*, 81 (March 2019), p.70.

<sup>2</sup> Kiyoshi Tatsumi, “Boro, Amuse Museum and Chuzaburo Tanaka.” Academic Forum Speech, *Design of Sustainable Concepts from the International Perspective*, Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China, October 21, 2019. Speech translated by Yoshi Cho. This speech was simultaneously translated during the conference.

demographic comparison between Edo (Tokyo) and other metropolises such as London and Paris. He concluded that Edo had been one of the major cities in the world before the *sakoku* (“closed-country”) policy was enforced, and dealing with people’s daily waste was an urgent task for the government. Tatsumi, looking back from a twenty-first century perspective, described the Edo period under the Tokugawa Shogunate’s governance as a society turning sustainability into reality through the banning of waste incineration and unplanned landfill.

Historically, a range of different recycling policies have been adopted in many societies: for example, during the nineteenth century, the dust-yard system in London provided an example of municipal waste management that recycled household waste. Recycling policies in France also date back to the sixteenth century. Japan is not the only historic example of waste management, but in his speech Tatsumi used many arguable examples to create a particular set of values around *boro*. For example, he paralleled the making of *kintsugi* (broken porcelain mended visibly using gold) with *boro* as two types of craft born of brokenness and repair. However, not all broken porcelain would become *kintsugi*, and the elite practice of using gold cannot be compared with *boro*. To address the long history of the Japanese tradition of reusing resources, Tatsumi talked about various materials that Japanese people reclaimed and transformed, such as paper and metal. He pointed out that the differentiation between social classes in Japan was another reason for lower-class people to maintain their traditions of reusing and repairing. He set these examples in the context of other cultures: working-class women selling hair to make wigs that were worn by the upper class and the collecting of excrement in cities to sell in the countryside as fertilizer. The faecal could be “classified” according to social classes, and the dung from wealthy families was more expensive than that of poor people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Tatsumi was using a narrative of Japanese recycling history and traditions, problematically in many ways, to explain the reasons why lower-class households sought ways to extend the life of their possessions and to eventually lead a discussion of *boro*. As Tatsumi explained, when it came to clothing options only a few affluent people could afford the tailoring and new fabrics offered by kimono shops. Most commoners had quite limited options in terms of what they wore, and they normally purchased kimonos from second-hand shops.<sup>4</sup> The unsold second-hand kimonos would be sent out to the rural villages. Worn areas on kimonos would be patched over with rows of *sashiko*, the running stitches used for reinforcement and to quilt layers of worn cloth together. This process of reworking textiles by piecing, patching, mending and stitching became a domestic tradition, which is now referred to as *boro*. Today, these *boro* garments are enthusiastically collected, exhibited, recreated and cherished for the traditional Japanese *mottainai* (waste nothing) spirit they convey.

In his conference presentation, Tatsumi's reflections mainly offered stories and beliefs that were attached to the presentation of *boro* in order to make connections with contemporary design. Along with his presentation, Tatsumi brought the *boro* collection from Amuse Museum in Tokyo to the Museum of Ethnic Costumes at BIFT for a five-month touring exhibition, entitled *Ragged Clothing out of Transcendent Soul*. At BIFT, where the audience consisted mostly of design students, the exhibition was associated with fashion and the theme of sustainability. Beijing was the first exhibition of the *boro* collection tour in China: before that, it had been shown at the Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra Craft & Quilt Fairs in 2019. After the BIFT exhibition, the collection travelled to Shenzhen Fine Art Institute as part of its *Exhibition of Benevolent Design*, and in March 2020 the collection travelled to New York's Japan Society for the exhibition *Boro Textiles: Sustainable Aesthetics*.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

By teasing out the ups and downs of *boro*'s reputation, from a humble textile born of necessity to an artistic symbol inspiring contemporary creative practitioners in art and design fields, this study examines the social and cultural forces that have driven the interest in *boro* as a Japanese cultural phenomenon within a distinctly transcultural context. I argue that *boro* is physically made in Japan, but conceptually defined through transcultural exchanges. This thesis pursues the following questions: What is *boro*? How does *boro* derive its values and meanings through reinvention in art and design fields? And what do we do when we make *boro* today?

My research investigates Japanese patchwork *boro* as a material culture developed in a transcultural environment, and as both a product and a producer of global connections. From a lower case "*boro*" denoting the daily used repaired fabric to an upper case "*Boro*" endowed with new ideas and creative possibilities, value is given to it by its makers, users and collectors, who have created a new concept of "*boro* aesthetics". Through tracing *boro* objects in museums and private collections, and analysing designers in Japan and overseas who work with *boro* forms, this thesis reads *boro* as an expanded field of practice and profiles real participants in the *boro* world to analyse the recreation of the upper case "*Boro*" through transcultural material flows. And the thesis explores how, as *boro* flowing from different locations and time periods, its meanings and values are continually changing and being recycled.

### **Historical Context: The Fall and Rise of Global *Boro***

Before *boro* became a notable presence in the domestic and global material landscape, in 1994, San Francisco's Craft and Folk Art Museum held an exhibition entitled *Riches from Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*. The curators of this

exhibition, textile expert Yoshida Shinichirō and cultural researcher Dai Williams, focused on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese working-class clothing made from recycled cotton materials. Describing the repaired textiles as “the world’s undiscovered treasures”, the curators considered that these textiles provided a perfect example of Japanese *mingei* – crafts of the people.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 shows a *sashiko* stitched jacket displayed in the exhibition. This is the type of heavily patched garment that is immediately recognised as “*boro*” today, although it was not described by this term when it was exhibited in 1994. When the *Riches from Rags* exhibition opened, *boro* was still an unfamiliar term to foreign audiences, and the aesthetic values of *boro* were hardly discussed either. Instead of introducing “*boro*”, the curators carefully showcased different forms of Japanese recycling techniques and traditions which would be referred to as “*boro*” in later exhibitions.



**Figure 1.** Sashiko Hanten.

*Riches from Rags: Sakiori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing.* p.56.

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<sup>5</sup> Shinichirō Yoshida and Dai Williams, “Saki-ori”, in: *Riches from Rags: Sakiori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1994), p.5.

In November 2000, ABC Gallery, which was then located in Ōsaka's Tennōji neighbourhood, launched the exhibition *Boro Afterglow – the Beauty of Boro*, showing fifty pieces from the collection of Nukata Kousaku. Nukata's collection dated mainly from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, collected from farmers, merchants, servants, fishermen, lumberjacks and their wives in rural areas along the Sea of Japan and the northern-east Honshū Island. This two-week exhibition was little documented; there was only a catalogue that quickly sold out. Figure 2 shows a newspaper report on Nukata's exhibition, with a photo of him standing in front of a *boro* futon cover. Titled “Charmed by the Beauty of *Boro* Textiles: Nukata from Higashi-Osaka is Exhibiting his Collection at Tennōji”, this report was more of an invitation than an exhibition review: Nukata was quoted as saying that every piece of *boro* embodies the aesthetic found in the frugal and diligent characteristics of Japanese daily life.<sup>6</sup>

This exhibition marked the first appearance of *boro* in a gallery space in Japan, and it received quite polarised feedback from the public. In an interview I conducted in 2017 with Tokyo-based antique dealer Morita Tadashi and his wife Morita Kazuko, who had been collecting *boro* for years before this exhibition, they related that seeing *boro* being mounted on the wall in the gallery space was truly a shock to the public at that time.<sup>7</sup> Some audiences felt deeply touched by the imprint of ancestral hands, while others felt embarrassed to see tatty sheets with stains shown as art.

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<sup>6</sup> “Charmed by the Beauty of Boro textiles: Mr. Gakuta from Higashi-Osaka, Exhibiting his Collection at Tennōji”, *Asahi Shimbun*, 24th October 2000. Photocopy from Tadashi Morita's personal archive. Translated by Uehara Ayaka. Original texts are shown in Figure 2, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Tadashi Morita, interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview, Tokyo, Japan, 15/12/2017. Translated by Iwata Yumika.



Figure 2. The first *boro* exhibition reported by the Japanese national newspaper Asahi Shimbun (scan copy). Newspaper provided by Morita Tadashi.

Nukata’s collection also attracted academic attention. Textile researcher Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada presented a paper at the Textile Society of America’s Symposium 2004, introducing the repaired cotton rags of Japan based on Nukata’s *boro* collecting experience.<sup>8</sup> Lacking historical documentation of *boro*, Wada did not pinpoint a specific period of origin, stating only that the humble clothes were remnants of ordinary people’s life stories several decades ago.<sup>9</sup> In fact, few texts on *boro* were able to provide any evidence to show the early appearance of *boro* in everyday Japanese life. Part of the reason for this is that mending has been such a universal practice through history, in every country and era. People repaired their

<sup>8</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “*Boro no Bi: Beauty in Humility – Repaired Cotton Rags of Old Japan*”, in: *Proceedings, Textile Society of America Symposium 2004*, 458, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004), p.278, available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/458/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



jackets, underwear and trousers, and there was no need to call them something different after repairing them. Until recently, the revalorisation of “*boro*” made these clothes an exclusively Japanese phenomenon, and the dating of a piece of *boro* becomes a proof of its authenticity.

In 2008, Amuse Museum – a museum specialising in *boro* and *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints – opened in Asakusa Tokyo (Figure 3). The entire *boro* collection in Amuse Museum was donated by the Japanese folklorist Tanaka Chūzaburō (1933-2013), who had gathered more than 30,000 pieces of Japanese folk art from his native region of Aomori in northern Japan. The *boro* exhibition in Amuse Museum lasted for ten years, from 2008 to 2018. In this exhibition, Tanaka’s narrative tried to provide a complete history of *boro* by using many heart-warming stories of how workers and fishermen’s families fought against their harsh environment and survived with limited natural resources in the “Snow Country”.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3.** *Boro: The Fabric of Life*. Exhibition. Amuse Museum, Tokyo.  
 Photograph by Leren Li [10 December 2018].

Owing to its location in Tokyo, a few steps away from the Sensō-ji Buddhist Temple, Amuse Museum had a considerable number of foreign visitors every year, and some of the

<sup>10</sup> Gina L Barnes, “Japan’s Natural Setting” in Karl F. Friday (ed.), *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850*, (London: Routledge, 2018), p.3-15 (p.9).

visitors spread the *boro* story to a wider audience. As the museum's director, Tatsumi Kiyoshi, recalled, the designer Kim Jones, at the time Louis Vuitton's creative director, came to the *boro* exhibition on a *Women's Wear Daily* (WWD) journalist's recommendation, and later on proclaimed the resurgence of "ragged" style with his Spring 2013 menswear collection. In this collection Jones collaborated with Japanese denim brand Kapital, which is well known for using *boro* patchwork design (Figure 4). Once *boro* had established its place in high-end menswear, its image was quickly popularised among fashionistas and design practitioners.

Since 2013, *boro* as a style element has been found in the products of luxury brands such as Dior, Chanel, Etro and Loewe, and also in street fashion brands such as Visvim, FDMLT and Beams. More than merely adopting *boro* as a seasonal look, some designers and brands adopted a *boro* aesthetic as a long-term design principle, creating more possibilities for *boro* in terms of materials, techniques and functions. These designers include Watanabe Junya, Craig Green, Yoshida Katsuyuki and Hirata Kiro.



**Figure 4.** Look from the runway of Louis Vuitton Spring 2013 Collection. (Source: *Vogue* Archive)

Transformed from a forgotten Japanese folk craft to some of the most highly prized textiles, *boro* has now been displayed in museums and galleries around the world. International dealers are very active players in the global *boro* market, and their passion for *boro* appears to have been prompted by its uniquely ethnographic yet Modernist visual dichotomy, a paradox which has held market appeal for both dealers and collectors.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Szczephanek, who runs the New York-based textile gallery Sri, has been collecting and exhibiting *boro* since 2001. Collaborating with dealers from Japan and Europe, Szczephanek organised the travelling exhibition *Boro: The Fabric of Life* in France, Portugal and Germany from 2013 to 2015. High-profile European *boro* collectors include Phillippe Boudin, one of the main dealers in Japanese crafts in Paris, who published a catalogue of *boro* in conjunction with his 2014 exhibition at London's Somerset House. Prices for *boro* futon covers collected and exhibited by these gallerists ranged from \$2,000 to \$12,000, depending on size and quality, but their ultimate value depended on their individual artistry, age, the rarity of the material and their configuration, all of which, Szczephanek argues, can be judged by "a practised eye."<sup>12</sup> As *boro* has received increasing attention from the global textile market, demand is getting hard to fulfil, and high-quality *boro* textiles are getting harder to find in Japan. In addition, designs of various forms and functions have derived from *boro*, such as Jan Kath's *boro* rug (Figure 5) and KUON's *boro* jacket, which was displayed in the Etnografiska museet (Ethnographic Museum) in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2018.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Szczephanek, "Riches from Rags, Boro Textiles from Japan", *Hali: The International Magazine of Oriental Carpets and Textiles*, 158, p.47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

<sup>13</sup> Etnografiska museet is one of the four museums under Världskulturmuseet (Museums of World Culture) <http://samlingar.varldskulturmuseerna.se/trasor-nu-och-da/>. [Accessed 23 Jan 2020]



**Figure 5.** Boro 21 made by Jan Kath  
Material: hand-spun Tibetan highland wool, nettle fibre and silk  
Technique: hand knotted. Photo courtesy of FRONT rug store

The artistic transformations of *boro* described above are good examples of how shifts in value occur across different cultural and social contexts. These indigo patchworks were once functional everyday items, made anonymously and with no intended audience other than the maker's immediate family. From being nameless, functional, and inglorious to becoming covetable, collectable and desired, now *boro* enjoys appreciation as a beauty born out of necessity. But where this "beauty" comes from, and how this attitude has developed, is a key question that this research aims to explore.

## Literature Review: Patchwork History and Boro Explorations

*Boro* is a type of Japanese patchwork. The inclusion of *boro* in patchwork history is significant in enriching the diversity of patchwork. Although *boro* is visually distinct from most of Western patchwork, there are still connections between them, and the literature map will start from a general patchwork history. Writing about *boro* often distinguishes *boro* from Western patchwork by its reparative purpose and torn fabrics.<sup>14</sup> However, in the literature on Western patchwork, both academic or popular, there are examples to challenge this point of view, as the idea of “mending from scraps” also applies to Western patchwork. In *The Dictionary of Needlework*, published in 1882, “patchwork” was described as “useful and ornamental”, and using “odds and ends of silk, satin, or chintz that would otherwise be thrown away”.<sup>15</sup> Nikki Tinkler, in *The Patchworker’s and Quilter’s Stitch Bible*, pointed out that nothing was wasted in making patchwork, as this craft was originally created by joining unused scraps of fabrics from a quilt or blanket to make another piece.<sup>16</sup> In the *Vogue Guide to Patchwork and Quilting*, the author Judy Brittain presents patchwork, appliqué and quilting as ancient textile fabrication techniques that originated more from economic necessity than aesthetic value.<sup>17</sup>

The history of patchwork is closely associated with that of quilting and appliqué, and because of shared techniques across these crafts, it can be hard to draw the boundaries between the three techniques. Textile experts from a range of cultures and time periods, including Asa Wettre, Caroline Crabtree, Christine Shaw, Thelma Rita Newman and Susan Briscoe, have all attempted to clarify the difference between the three terms.<sup>18</sup> In their writing, patchwork has

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<sup>14</sup> Austin Bryant, “All About Boro – the Story of Japanese Patchwork”, *Heddels*, 31 August 2015.

<https://www.heddels.com/2015/08/all-about-boro-story-japanese-patchwork/>

<sup>15</sup> Sophia Caulfeild and Blanche Seward, *The Dictionary of Needlework: An Encyclopaedia of Artistic, Plain and Fancy Needlework* (London: L.Upcott Gill, 1882). p.379-385.

<sup>16</sup> Nikki Tinkler, *The Patchworker’s and Quilter’s Stitch Bible* (London: Quarto Publishing, 2006), p.7.

<sup>17</sup> Judy Brittain, *Vogue Guide to Patchwork and Quilting* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Asa Wettre, in *Old Swedish Quilts* (California: Interweave Press, 1995). Caroline Crabtree and Christine Shaw, *Quilting, Patchwork and Applique: A World Guide* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007). Thelma Rita

been defined as the fabric made by piecing together smaller fabric fragments to make a whole; appliqué is the sewing of fabric fragments onto a larger background fabric and quilting is the stitching together of patchwork and appliqué in three layers – the top fabric, the batting, and the backing – using a running stitch.

Publications about patchwork are mostly technique-oriented, and textile scholars from North America and Europe normally focus on Western patchwork history. Where Japanese patchwork is mentioned in these kinds of books it is mainly as a pattern style, and the history and development of *boro* is not well recorded in written documents either. For example, in *Japanese Inspirations: Easy-to-Make Patchwork and Appliqué Projects*, Janet Haigh introduces ways of using traditional Western patchwork patterns and adding Japanese motifs and shapes to create an “oriental flavour”;<sup>19</sup> and in the recently published book *Patchwork and Quilting: A Maker’s Guide* (published in 2017), a section entitled “*boro*” is included which introduces the history of *boro* along with instructions for the reader on how to make a *boro* tote bag.<sup>20</sup>

Existing writing about *boro*, its significance and cultural meaning, can be divided into the following three categories: patchwork manuals, exhibition catalogues and writing on art and design. In the patchwork manuals, *boro* is normally mentioned to emphasise the practice of repairing textiles through piecing, patching and stitching.<sup>21</sup> In exhibition catalogues, moving stories of poverty and Japanese aesthetic traditions take up many pages, creating a feeling of rustic preciousness around the reworking of clothes.<sup>22</sup> And in writing on sustainable fashion,

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Newman, *Quilting, Patchwork, Applique and Trapunto: Traditional Methods and Original Designs* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1974). Susan Briscoe, *Japanese Quilt Blocks to Mix & Match: Over 125 Patchwork, Appliqué and Sashiko Designs* (New York: Kodansha Publishing, 2007)

<sup>19</sup> Janet Haigh, *Japanese Inspirations: Easy-to-make Patchwork and Appliqué Projects* (London: Collins & Brown Publishing, 2000), p.14.

<sup>20</sup> *Patchwork and Quilting: A Maker’s Guide* (London: Thames & Hudson; Victoria and Albert Museum, 2017), p.136.

<sup>21</sup> Claire Wellesley Smith, “Japanese boro”, in: *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art* (London: Batsford, 2015), p.80.

<sup>22</sup> David Sorgato, *BORO* (Milan: Maphalda Edizioni, 2004).

*boro* mostly refers to its role in a way of life, rather than how to make a patchwork or collecting vintage fabrics.<sup>23</sup> However, these writings do not trace the processes and the factors that have transformed *boro* from a forgotten folk craft into a highly prized textile. There is a gap in the literature that this project aims to fill by listening to the people who are in the “*boro* world” and observing material flow in a global context to further understand the contemporary resurgence of *boro*.

In the first category, the patchwork manuals, *boro* is normally shown as an oriental patchwork style, along with Japanese *sashiko* needlework. For example, in the V&A Museum’s *Patchwork & Quilting*, *boro* is recognised as a cultural product born from thrift, and is categorised as “freeform patchwork”; the improvisatory effect of the patches is mentioned here in comparison with abstract art.<sup>24</sup> In the V&A publication, instructions for making *boro* bags are provided by Susan Briscoe, who also wrote *The Ultimate Sashiko Sourcebook: Patterns, Projects and Inspirations* and *Quilt Essentials: Japanese Style*.<sup>25</sup> Similar DIY instructions are also given in books such as *Make and Mend*.<sup>26</sup> These publications mainly focus on daily repair and craft making, and they aim to educate readers about the lack of recycling in modern urban life, with no in-depth historical narrative about *boro* as a craft.

The second category of literature on *boro* is the *boro*-related exhibition catalogues. The 1994 exhibition *Riches from Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing* is a very early catalogue that established the trend for writing about *boro* from museum and curatorial perspectives. Offering more than just a photo album of *boro*, curators Yoshida Shinichirō and Dai Williams introduce the background to Japanese recycling culture, thoughtfully setting it in its ecological, historical and socio-economic context. The catalogue

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<sup>23</sup> Hazel Clark, “Slow + Fashion – Women’s Wisdom”, *Fashion Practice*, 11:3, 309-327, DOI: [10.1080/17569370.2019.1659538](https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2019.1659538)

<sup>24</sup> *Patchwork & Quilting: A Maker’s Guide*, p.132.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Briscoe, *The Ultimate Sashiko Sourcebook: Patterns, Projects and Inspirations* (Exeter: David & Charles Publishing, 2004). *Quilt Essentials: Japanese Style* (Exeter: David & Charles Publishing, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Jessica Marquez, “Boro-inspired Tote,” in *Make and Mend*, (New York: Watson-Guption, 2018), p.132.

provides information about land and climate, shipping route development, the cultivation of cotton and other bast fibres, and the technology of weaving and dyeing in Japan.<sup>27</sup> As the exhibition's title indicates, the catalogue highlights a range of repair techniques, such as *sakiori* and *sashiko*, while the term "*boro*" is not used at all. For example, a piece of a heavily patched bedcover is described simply as "futon". This catalogue implies that the term "*boro*" had not been popularised at that time, but that Japanese recycling techniques were attracting attention from outside Japan. In contrast to more recent writings that have focused on *boro* as a Japanese mending tradition that originated in Tōhoku (northeast Japan), this earlier catalogue placed the emphasis on the historical background of the repair culture in Japan rather than on narratives about a specific area. It covered both recycling history in northern Japan and explanations about the phenomenon in terms of land and climate, the development of transportation, bast fibre cultivation and history of cotton and weaving technology in Japan.

In 2004, Italian textile dealer David Sorgato published a 95-page Italian/English language catalogue for a *boro* exhibition in his gallery in Milan. In this, Sorgato included fifty examples of futon covers, and at this exhibition and in the catalogue they were referred to as "*boro*" for the first time in a non-Japanese publication. Sorgato explains that in Japan mended and patched textiles were called *boro*.<sup>28</sup> This term had not been used in Yoshida and Williams' earlier publication, and its use in Sorgato's 2004 catalogue implies that the change of terminology had begun to be accepted in Europe. Like the earlier catalogue, this one also provided an ethnographic and historical background for the Japanese mending tradition in relation to cotton cultivation, Buddhist influence and the hardship and rural poverty of farmers and fishermen. However, Sorgato tended to think that *boro* carries a strong aesthetic message, and compares images of Western abstract painting with two-dimensional futon covers. The

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<sup>27</sup> Yoshida and Williams, "Saki-ori".

<sup>28</sup> Sorgato.



nature of the exhibiting of *boro* had shifted from being purely a display to presenting a selling event, and in the catalogues the narratives of *boro* changed accordingly.

The third catalogue that was significant in highlighting the shifting values of *boro* was written by Kawasaki Kei and Stephen Szczepanek for their collaborative exhibition held at the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon, United States, in 2011. The exhibition, *The Fabric of Life: Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan*, focused on the concept of *mottainai*, a Japanese term conveying a sense of regret for waste, and the content of the exhibition focused on repaired textiles in Japan, as the title indicates. This was the year that the earthquake and tsunami disaster struck the Tōhoku region of Japan, and the catalogue suggested that the natural disaster had led Japanese people to question the continued use of nuclear power in their vulnerable land, and also to realise the importance of treating things with great care.<sup>29</sup> Corresponding with this social issue, in this exhibition *boro* and other repaired textiles were used as examples of a Japanese approach to the natural environment around the theme of living in harmony with nature. Kawasaki and Szczepanek qualified their use of the term *boro*: for example, when they described “a kind of haphazard patchwork of indigo dyed cotton”, it would follow with an explanation: “what is now referred to as *boro*”.<sup>30</sup> This exhibition in 2011 set the tone for other *boro* exhibitions that followed in Europe. In France, Spain, Germany and London, the phrase “*boro*: the fabrics of life” has been repeatedly used in various contexts.

The last book in this category, which is probably the mostly influential work for English readers, is *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan* by Koide Yukiko and Tsuzuki Kyōichi.<sup>31</sup> Compared with the catalogues discussed above, this is not only a catalogue for a specific exhibition, but also an English-Japanese bilingual culture-related book published and

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<sup>29</sup> Kei Kawasaki and Stephen Szczepanek, *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life: Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan* (Portland, OR: Portland Japanese Garden, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Yukiko Koide and Kyōichi Tsuzuki, *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan*. (Tokyo: ASPECT Corp., 2009). [unpaginated]

sold internationally. Published in 2008, this book was based on Japanese folklorist Tanaka Chūzaburō's *boro* collection displayed in Tokyo's Amuse Museum from 2009 to 2019. Due to the single source of the collection, the book claimed that *boro*'s "home" was Aomori, where Tanaka Chūzaburō lived, and where he sourced most of his *boro* textiles from. For readers who knew the context of this book this is a reasonable statement because it is based on a specific collection. But for most readers, who had little knowledge about *boro*, this would be an oversimplified and misleading statement. As well as the arguable assertion of *boro*'s origin, this book recreated the value of *boro* as a textile aesthetics made by impoverished country folk, influencing contemporary fashion and design industries around the world.

In Tanaka's books *Illustrated Book of the Old Clothes in Northern East World*, and *Everything Has a Heart*, he kept a record of his collection and also his reflections during his collecting journeys to remote villages.<sup>32</sup> Based on Tanaka's work, another well-respected dealer in Japanese *mingei* textiles, Morita Tadashi, also published a book on *boro* history, *Memories of the Cloth: The Inherited Practical Beauty from the Edo to the Showa Period* (*Nuno no Kioku: Edo kara Shōwa Uketsugareru Yōbi*).<sup>33</sup> Unlike the other books and catalogues on *boro*, that mainly focus on repair techniques and textiles, this book includes many images of fine kimonos, printed chintz textiles and other delicate fabrics. As one of the earliest collectors in Japan who brought *boro* to the antiques market, in his book Morita expanded the understanding of *boro* beyond a repaired patchwork born of necessity and endowed it with unique aesthetic value in parallel with other traditional Japanese textile crafts.

The third category of literature draws from art and design writing, including the sustainability debate. In some texts, such as works by Jody Alexander, Saito Yuriko and Lou

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<sup>32</sup> Chūzaburō Tanaka, *Zusetsu Michinoku no Kofu no Sekai (Illustrated Book of the Old Clothes in Northern East World)* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 2009); *Mono niha Kokoro ga Aru (Everything Has a Heart)* (Tokyo: Amuse Edutainment, 2011)

<sup>33</sup> Tadashi Morita, *Nuno no Kioku: Edo kara Shōwa Uketsugareru Yōbi (Memories of the cloth: The Inherited Beauty from Edo to Showa Period)*. (Kyoto: Seigensha Art Publishing, 2011).

Taylor, *boro* appears as a passing mention.<sup>34</sup> These texts imply that *boro* as a cultural phenomenon has been observed by some scholars, although the subjects of these works are not *boro*, and *boro*'s history before the twenty-first century is hardly mentioned. In most of the articles, *boro*'s history apparently started from 2013, when Kim Jones brought it to the Louis Vuitton runway in Paris, and established *boro* as a fashion trend and an aesthetic.

When discussions about *boro*'s value shift from its original function to the aesthetic level, writings on Japanese *Mingei* movement would provide theoretical support in this project to better explain the redefinition of *boro* from lower case to upper case, as earlier mentioned in this chapter. In *Mingei: The Living Tradition in Japanese Art*, *mingei* is as “people’s art”, as opposed to the luxurious objects and fine art pieces made by famous artists in very small numbers.<sup>35</sup> Yanagi Sōetsu, who invented the term “*mingei*” in the 1920s from the Japanese phrase “*minshuteki kogei* (common people’s crafts)”, used this word to represent his studies on Japanese aesthetics and folk art.<sup>36</sup> In the article written by Yanagi Sori, son of Yanagi Sōetsu, he recalled his father’s folkcrafts hunting in flea markets, where pieces of ragged cloth were found and collected by Yanagi Sōetsu.<sup>37</sup> There’s no clear evidence showing that Yanagi used the term “*boro*” to describe his textile collection, but the nature of *boro* could fit into principles of *mingei* and Yanagi’s categorisation of folkcrafts – common household objects handmade by unknown craftsmen.<sup>38</sup> The history of the *mingei* movement helps to understand how everyday objects could be appreciated aesthetically through challenging the narrow definition of art. The discussions of *mingei* theory could offer a Japanese perspective that explains the “beauty” of

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<sup>34</sup> Jody Alexander, *The Boro Aesthetic* [self-published] (s.l.: Blurb, 2017). Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.215. Lou Taylor, “The Several Lives of a Collection of Rag Dump Clothing from Normandy (1900-55): From Farm to Dump to Poverty Chic” *Fashion Studies*, 1:1 (2018), p.21.

<sup>35</sup> Sōetsu Yanagi, Elisabeth Frolet, Nick Pearce, Sori Yanagi, *Mingei: The Living Tradition in Japanese Art*. (Tokyo: Japan Folk Crafts Museum, 1991). p.2.

<sup>36</sup> Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*. (Tokyo: Kadansha International Ltd., 1972)

<sup>37</sup> Sori Yanagi, “The Discovery of Beauty: Sōetsu Yanagi and Folkcrafts,” *Mingei: The Living Tradition in Japanese Art*. (Tokyo: Japan Folk Crafts Museum, 1991). p.29-30.

<sup>38</sup> Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p.52.

long-forgotten objects like *boro* and the differences between lower and upper case “*boro/Boro*” across different contexts.

Some of the literature on *boro* has therefore indicated that *boro* has influenced contemporary design, but only a few researchers have made closer examinations of these designers and brands. For example, art historian Petra Holmberg, in her article “Rags to Riches: Boro Fashion”, interviewed the founder and chief designer of the Japanese brand KUON about the process of translating traditional concepts of *boro* and *mottainai* into contemporary fashion language.<sup>39</sup> Holmberg’s work confirms that wearing *boro* today is no longer a sign of poverty: quite the opposite – it is a new luxury; Japanese designers have realised the value of this textile heritage in Western fashion, and started to create new *boro*-inspired clothes.<sup>40</sup> In *The Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*, Sasha Robin Wallinger uses the contemporary appropriation of *mottainai* and *boro* as an example of how lessons from the past can be applied to contemporary practices of sustainability in fashion, shared with audiences and built upon to unleash unexplored potential.<sup>41</sup> However, she provides no practical examples to support this argument. Brands like KUON and Kapital, that have been established worldwide, tend to be the main references in this writing, and other independent creative practitioners who are practising *boro* and sustainable fashion have not yet received adequate academic attention.

## **Theoretical Approaches to *Boro***

Since the rise of industrialisation, handcrafts have been associated with nostalgia and anti-progressive notions. Christopher Frayling suggests that they are “nostalgia masquerading

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<sup>39</sup> Petra Holmberg, “Rags to Riches: Boro Fashion”, *Vav* magazine, 2 (2018), 16-18 (p.17), available at: [http://en.vavmagasinet.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Boro\\_Sakiori\\_Eng.pdf](http://en.vavmagasinet.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Boro_Sakiori_Eng.pdf). [Accessed 10 July 2019.]

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Sasha Robin Wallinger, “A History of Sustainability in Fashion”, in: Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.157.

as history”.<sup>42</sup> The revival of *boro* raises questions about how something discarded as waste becomes a collectable art piece through nostalgic stories of Japanese craft tradition. Furthermore, has the art market itself been responsible for making *boro* into a re-invented aspect of Japanese cultural heritage? To help answer these questions, I draw on Michael Thompson’s book *Rubbish Theory* to explore the dynamics through which rubbish can re-enter circulation as a prized commodity far exceeding its original value. The fundamental belief of Rubbish Theory is that the two cultural categories – “Transient” and “Durable” – are socially imposed on the world of objects, and the value transformation from the Transient to the Durable is achieved through turning it into the category of Rubbish and radically assigning new values to it.<sup>43</sup> In Thompson’s book, he explains that no object is fated to remain relegated to a particular category of value, and that value is a mutable social relation.

Thompson argues that the value of things can be either Transient (decreasing in value with time) or Durable (increasing in value), and that Rubbish provides a channel for the study of transfers from the Transient to the Durable. Thompson draws on an example from the nineteenth century: woven silk pictures, called Stevengraphs, that were produced at the Coventry factory of Thomas Stevens Ltd.<sup>44</sup> A complete set of 60 Stevengraphs cost £2.55 in 1902. Immediately after purchase they were worth nothing, because of the decline in interest, and they remained “zero-value rubbish” for the next fifty or so years.<sup>45</sup> But in 1963, a revival of interest in Stevengraphs stimulated an exhibition at the Frank T. Sabin Gallery in London, and prices of Stevengraphs rocketed. By 1973, they were worth £3,000 each, which was about two hundred times their original cost (allowing for inflation). One chapter of Thompson’s book is devoted to explaining the reasons for the decline and revival of interest in these items, and the side effects caused by the shift in value: for example, the level of scholarship devoted to

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher Frayling, *On Craftsmanship: Towards a New Bauhaus* (London: Oberon Books, 2011), p.84.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, p.5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Stevengraphs.<sup>46</sup> To generalise, Thompson argues that the case of Stevengraphs exemplifies the increase in the economic value of objects once they have entered the category of Durable, accompanied by an increase in aesthetic value. Durables attract the attention of the wealthy and the powerful, and there is an increase in research and scholarship, as well as an increase in acquisitions among museums, that results from these activities.

Thompson built on the work of Martin O'Brien, who argued that "waste is culturally, politically and economically a matter of the greatest sociological significance; it has its own materiality and has been organised and sustained through identifiable social and political relationships."<sup>47</sup> O'Brien referred to waste as a "dynamic of social change, encoded with cultural representations," and he focuses on analysing waste and its processes of value conversion.<sup>48</sup> O'Brien's work shows how the movement of rubbish value demands the creation of relationships between "rubbish" and other components through which rubbish releases economic values for exploitation. In the case of *boro*, a transformative element has been the nostalgic feelings that are carried in the frayed fabrics. Jean Baudrillard explained the appreciation of nostalgic material as a response to the notion of "atmospheric value."<sup>49</sup> He further analysed atmospheric value regarding colour, materials and gestural systems, and he used wood to exemplify atmospheric value in materials. Thinking about odour, age, and even parasites on wood, Baudrillard described wood as a material that has "being".<sup>50</sup> In common with wood, the materials of *boro* draw their substance from the earth, and the symbolic naturalness also embodies the time embedded in them. As materials for decorative or other purposes, they are both sought after today: Baudrillard called this phenomenon "high-priced

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.30.

<sup>47</sup> Martin O'Brien, "Rubbish Values: Reflections on the Political Economy of Waste, *Science as Culture*, 8:3 (1999), 269-295, DOI: [10.1080/09505439909526548](https://doi.org/10.1080/09505439909526548)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London & New York: Verso, 2005), p.30.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.38.

nostalgia”.<sup>51</sup> Considering the transformation of *boro* from a symbol of dirt-poor families to a highly valued item of “poverty chic”, the role of the commodification of nostalgia will be an important aspect to consider.

In Baudrillard’s writing about atmospheric value and materials, he also discussed the value judgement of authenticity by comparing “natural wood” and “cultural wood”.<sup>52</sup> The term “cultural wood” represents functional substitutes for natural materials. Baudrillard further argues that “substances are simply what they are, and there is no such thing as a true or false.”<sup>53</sup> “The inherited nobility of a given material can exist only within a certain cultural ideology, and even that cultural prejudice is vulnerable to the passage of time.”<sup>54</sup> Baudrillard rejected the tendency to consider natural materials more valuable than cultural materials, asking how concrete could be somehow less “authentic” than stone. In the case of *boro*, Baudrillard’s discussion of the authenticity of materials also applies to the debate about real and fake *boro* and value assessments according to its authenticity.

When *boro* is introduced to the global art market, discussions related to authenticity – the real and fake *boro* – are more frequently emphasised and decided by male textile dealers and gallerists, while the female voices are often missing. In her book *Subversive Stitch, Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Rozsika Parker discusses the relationship between women and embroidery, and ask questions about the difficulty that textile craft as a female activity faces in getting acknowledgement as fine art.<sup>55</sup> In another book co-written with Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, they further explore the misrepresentation of women and how the stereotypical femininity of being “graceful, delicate

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.39.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010).

and decorative” marginalises women’s work in mainstream (male) art. They make a radical claim in this book which identifies “crafty” women’s work as “high art”.<sup>56</sup>

Regarding reactions towards the dismissal of women and the power relations, in the essay “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History,” Kirsty Robertson discusses contemporary feminist craftivism and expresses her concerns about the inherent gendering of textile work and essentialising stereotypes of female textile craft makers. Using fibre artists’ projects, such as Tracey Emin’s quilts and embroideries, Robertson argues that the explosion in the amount of textile work in the contemporary art world and art markets is not only attributed to the notable work of female artists but can also be connected to the degendering textile and handwork promoted by the feminist movement and the changing political context.<sup>57</sup> Based on her observations, the traditional centres of textile industries in the West have been moved away under the influence of globalisation, and in the nations who have been hardest hit, such as Britain, the United States, and Canada, the decline of economy comes with a resurgence of interest in crafting practices.<sup>58</sup> Robertson further argues that the current tentative acceptance of textile craft into the art world has resulted from both textile activism and globalisation-influenced capitalism. In her book *Radical Decadence*, Julia Skelly explores the gendered discourse of decadence as a liberating aesthetic to subvert and exceed expected feminine roles. Skelly uses “decadence” as an analytical framework to investigate contemporary feminist textile art using materials historically associated with “craft”.<sup>59</sup> The “excessiveness” of the craft materials that Skelly addressed throughout the book is in fact, a metaphor to depict the “excessiveness” in the marginalised live experiences of women. Works

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<sup>56</sup> Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, “Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts,” in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1981), p.50.

<sup>57</sup> Kirsty Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History,” in Maria Elena Buszek ed, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.184-203.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.192.

<sup>59</sup> Julia, Skelly, "Introduction: Decadence, Feminism, and “Excess”." In *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft*, 1–23. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Accessed November 22, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474284981.0006>.



written by these female craft researchers and theorists can be used to extend understanding of the revival of *boro* by reconsidering imbalanced power relations, influences from globalisation and capitalism, as well as the way they affect gender narratives.

From conversations with *boro* collectors and curators, there are conflicts and divergent values from male and female, Japanese and non-Japanese perspectives. These conflicts are also present in the market exchange, gallery collection and museum display of *boro*. Corresponding to the dialectical binaries that Glenn Adamson addresses in *The Invention of Craft*, other conflicts, including craft/industry, tacit/explicit, hand/machine, traditional/progressive also apply to this research.<sup>60</sup> These binary relationships have also been explained by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, using the idea of smooth/striated space to demonstrate transformative interactions. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari used a series of models to illuminate different aspects of the philosophy of spatial logics, arguing that spatial relationships are among many forces that are manifest over time.<sup>61</sup> The models ranged across numerous fields of knowledge, from textiles to mathematics. For example, they used the structure of textile, its surface and its underside, to argue that space is misunderstood within binary oppositions. The ideological oppositions and the transformative binaries add new perspectives to the debates about whether *boro* is art or not, and whether there are differences between fake *boro* and real *boro*.

Cultural theorist Claire Colebrook has reflected on Deleuzian ideas of “becoming”, and summarises that “true becoming does not have an end outside itself: it is not an action directed towards an end or goal.”<sup>62</sup> To some extent, the specific mending practices of *boro* resemble this concept for the reason that patches can be endlessly added, and *boro* was a never “finished” work. Deleuze’s argument stated that all “beings” in the world are merely relatively stable

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<sup>60</sup> Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.551.

<sup>62</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.145.

moments in a flow of “becoming-life”.<sup>63</sup> Deleuze and Guattari positioned patchwork as a space made of “a set of vicinities”<sup>64</sup> which retain “open, informal, rhizomatic (mobile, multiple, non-generative) characteristics”, and can be “defined solely by circulation of states.”<sup>65</sup> A patchwork, like a rhizome, had no beginning or end, it was transformative in that it can produce different kinds of assemblages. Informed by Deleuzian ideas of heterogeneous spaces, this research draws on the cross-cultural investigation of *boro*, exploring and articulating *boro* through more reflective and transdisciplinary approaches.

## Methodology

The primary research objectives of this project are to enable a cultural investigation that explores the evolving history and creative interpretations of *boro* from its birthplace to its current global material circulation through different agents within various cultural contexts. This research therefore builds on methodological models applied in material culture studies, and this project also adapts interdisciplinary research approaches of craft, fashion and design studies in order to investigate *boro*'s meanings and values in specific contexts.

The term “material culture” is defined in different ways depending on the disciplinary context within which the term is used. This research explores *boro* on a material level, as a type of heavily repaired textiles, to a cultural level, as something abstract and meaningful that people connect to objects. *Boro* has been seen as a representative cultural symbol of Japanese aesthetics. It is also an expression of transcultural connections and creative inspiration. The current popularity of *boro* and the cultural values it represents are in sharp contrast to the attitudes to *boro* that prevailed even a few decades ago, and these changing interpretations can

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<sup>63</sup> Colebrook, p.125.

<sup>64</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p.564.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

be usefully investigated with a material culture approach. As art historian Jules David Prown asserts, a material culture approach is the study, through artefacts, of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time.<sup>66</sup> A material cultural approach is an object-centred research which also places value, both intrinsic values and those values endowed by human cultural practices, at the centre of the investigation. This research studies *boro* as a cultural object which is created as a marker of value and identity. Case studies in this thesis combine material analysis of specific collections and pieces with examinations of the contexts of their presentation in order to assess broader cultural meanings and creative interpretations and significance.

Drawing upon visual archives and field observations, this research brings together not just historical records, but also oral interviews with people who are still actively working on the subject, including textile researchers, museum curators, private collectors, dealers, design experts, and craft makers. Therefore, ethnography, or participant observation, is a primary method that I used to conduct the research, because it places most importance on interviewees' interpretations and explanations of their behaviours. In existing histories of *boro* the makers have received most of the attention, but the people who are currently promoting *boro* and writing its history are equally important in this research. Observing their work and listening to what they say about their experience enables us to take account of the production of *boro* history, especially recent developments. This additional new perspective on the study of *boro* offers a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings of *boro* today.

The four chapters of this thesis provide discussions about different types of values and meanings embodied by *boro* within different contexts. Prown points out that some values of material objects, such as material and utilitarian values, are intrinsic to them. Other values are

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<sup>66</sup> Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17:1 (1982), 1-19 (p.1).

“more aesthetic, spiritual and emotional, expressing attitudes toward other human beings or towards the world.”<sup>67</sup> The meanings of an object are many layered and overlapping, and the recreated values of an object can be more transient and variable than those values that have been attached by the people who originally made or used it. In the case of *boro*, its values have been changing through time, and the value reconstruction process embodies changing cultural beliefs within different social and cultural contexts.

Prown’s material analysis guide has been critiqued and further refined by scholars from various disciplines. Historians Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello argue that the ways in which historians approach artefacts and material culture “can, and should, vary depending on the available materials, the context and the aims of the research.”<sup>68</sup> And because of the interdisciplinary nature of material culture, there cannot be a unified and universal methodology with which to study the objects.

In 1989, building on the work of Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), Strathern (1988), and A. Weiner (1985), anthropologist Janet Hoskins defined a category of “biographical objects”, which “occupy one pole of the continuum between gifts and commodities and are endowed with the personal characteristics of their owners”.<sup>69</sup> In her book *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People’s Lives*, Hoskins transgressed the usual boundaries between persons and objects and showed how far certain possessions can come to be seen as surrogate selves. From the informants I interviewed on my field trips, I discovered that the histories of *boro* and the life histories of its owners, even though they didn’t make *boro* themselves, were hard to separate. For example, in my interviews with people who had been working in the “*boro* world” for years, or even decades, I received more introspective and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>68</sup> Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Writing Material Culture History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), p.5.

<sup>69</sup> Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People’s Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p.7.

intimate stories of the ways that the interviewees' own lives and career paths had been influenced by *boro*. In the interviews with contemporary *boro*-inspired craft makers, it was clear that the stories generated from *boro* offer a form of reflection on the construction and meaning of one's own life.

Although *boro* was born out of necessity, its cultural significance can be perceived in its style rather than its function. As Prown concludes, for the purposes of material culture analysis, "the aesthetic aspects of artefacts are more significant than the utilitarian ones."<sup>70</sup> To some extent, this argument would apply to *boro* if it was simply considered as collectable objects in art galleries. With the arrival of debates on sustainability, *boro*'s utilitarian value has been recognised by designers. Whatever values *boro* is given, they apply in a given context – whether this is antique collecting, rubbish, art, fashion, or lifestyle – and this research looks to the shifting contexts of *boro* as object, style and symbol.

A research method is usually a set of linear process that helps the researcher to set a stable framework to conduct the research. For my research I envisioned another approach, which follows an unsorted pattern of events and practices. As discussed in the previous section, Deleuze and Guattari describe patchwork as a rhizomatic space made of a set of vicinities which generate connections and heterogeneity in continuous variations.<sup>71</sup> This idea describes the dynamic global network of the material flow of *boro* through different agencies under various contexts. Through the meandering paths leading to the primary resources I am not just an observer, but also fold myself into these interactions and create intersections in this *boro* field.

During the process of my research, I participated in Amuse Museum's touring exhibitions in China as a guide for students from BIFT: I introduced the artisans I interviewed

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<sup>70</sup> Prown, p.15.

<sup>71</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p.564.

to collectors and shop owners and helped their work attract more exposure; my interviews with a social media *boro* influencer also created new conversations between her and her followers. As an observer, and also as a participant, I can see there is a cultural continuity in *boro*. And by playing a role in its living history, I have tried to add some new patches to this piece.

## **Outline of Primary Sources**

This thesis uses cases studies and examples to investigate the creation of values around *boro* through material analysis, contextual analysis, interviews and field observations. Research for this project was undertaken in Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the People's Republic of China. This project started in the UK, where I conducted the initial research for the subject and formed the structure of the thesis. The majority of sources were collected during my ethnographic trips to Tokyo, Kōbe, Kyoto and Aomori between 2017 and 2018, focusing on three groups of people and events related to *boro*: textile dealers and their collections; museum exhibitions, makers and workshops.

Before conducting interviews, I had completed the RCA Research Ethics Review and the Risk Assessment Form. I also provided each informant with a hard copy of the Consent form and Information Sheet which outlined my research topic and requested their permission for me to use the information they gave me (see Appendix II). Each informant signed the form and returned it to me, after which I kept it securely on file, both electronically and physically. Most of the interviews were recorded in a relaxed environment in which the informants could talk freely and show their *boro* collections, supplemented with additional notes made afterwards but not during the interview, to avoid making the informants feel uncomfortable. Most of the interviews for this research were conducted in English. The interview with Tatsumi Kiyoshi was translated by Yoshi Cho, a staff member at Amuse Museum, who could speak

both Chinese and Japanese. In the field observations of flea markets in Tokyo and Kyoto, conversations with textiles dealers were translated by local tour guide Yamaguchi Rena and Hongrui Li.

### **Textile Dealers and *Boro* Collectors**

Private collections have played an important part in the global exchange of *boro*. Interviewing private *boro* collectors provided particular insight into the collecting practices and changing interpretations of *boro*. In 2016, I began my interviews with London-based antique textile dealer Joss Graham, who had expertise in Asian textiles, and Fuji Maeda, a vintage Japanese textile dealer based in Brighton. Conversations with them provided the basis for my primary knowledge regarding the network of textile dealers across Japan, the United States and some European countries, which helped me to set up plans for subsequent interviews in those countries.

In July 2017, I visited Stephen Szczepanek, the New York-based textile collector, writer and owner of Sri gallery in Brooklyn. He provided information about exhibitions he had organised since 2011 and his future exhibition plans. In the interview, Szczepanek shared two important sources for his *boro* acquisitions in Japan: Morita Antique Store in Tokyo and Kei Gallery in Kyoto.

Through an introduction by Szczepanek, I visited Morita Tadashi and Kawasaki Kei in December 2017. Morita and his wife Morita Kazuko talked to me about the first *boro* exhibition at Ōsaka's ABC Gallery in 2000 and showed me their archive documenting the exhibition, including the invitation, the photos they took in the gallery and newspaper reports. Visits to Morita Antique Store and Kei Gallery in Kyoto allowed me to conduct more in-depth material

observations, with the huge collections that the two collectors kept and their generous sharing of their textile knowledge and collecting experience, and the references in their books to *boro*.

In July 2017 and September 2018, I went to Paris and conducted two interviews with Philippe Boudin, the owner of Mingei Gallery. As a client of Morita, Boudin described his collecting experiences in Japan, from looking for *boro* by himself to commissioning Morita Tadashi to search for “real” *boro*. Boudin also shared his *boro* book collection, and on his bookshelves, I found a *boro* catalogue written by David Sorgato, a Milan-based antique textile dealer who had held a *boro* exhibition in his gallery and compiled the catalogue in 2004.<sup>72</sup> I contacted Sorgato through Instagram and met him in his gallery during Milan Design Week in April 2019. With around twenty years of *boro* collecting and trading experience, Sorgato was a key witness and also a participant in the rise and value-recreation process of *boro* in Europe. He was also one of the earliest people to write about *boro* in relation to Western abstract painting and modern art. Because Sorgato had stopped collecting *boro* for many years after it rose rapidly in price, his name was little known in the “*boro* world”.

Finding the key figures in *boro* field was like creating a meshwork through the “nomadic practice” emphasised in Deleuze and Guattari’s work. As Deleuze and Guattari note, “‘nomad thought’ does not immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority, it moves freely in an element of exteriority”.<sup>73</sup> The lack of a written history of *boro* brought some difficulties to the primary research at the beginning. Therefore, I started from people I could find in London, gradually letting the rhizomes of the network expand, leading me to other research journeys. This research is built upon points, the vicinities of the rhizome, and it tries to connect them into lines, a rhizome of overlapping lines.

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<sup>72</sup> Sorgato.

<sup>73</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p.x.



### **Museum Exhibitions of *Boro***

In March 2017, I visited the Antonio Ratti Textile Center and Reference Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. My research at this early stage was about East Asian patchwork textiles more broadly, and the research centre manager Eva Labson had prepared examples of patchwork from Japan, China and Korea for me. Although the Metropolitan Museum had no *boro* pieces, there were many delicate *sashiko* examples in the Japanese textiles collection.

After confirming that my research would focus exclusively on *boro*, in December 2017 I made my first field trip to Japan. I visited the Kōbe Fashion Museum to research the *boro* exhibition *Aesthetics of Boro: From Peasant Clothing to Modern Fashion*, held in 2016. At Amuse Museum, Tokyo, I examined the specific collection of folklorist Tanaka Chūzaburō and the museum displays, and I identified the connections between the Tokyo and Kōbe exhibitions. With help from Yoshi Cho, a member of Amuse Museum's staff, I obtained translated materials, and also initiated email contact with Amuse Museum's director, Tatsumi Kiyoshi.

Back in London in January 2018, I contacted Anna Jackson, keeper of the Asian Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, regarding the process involved in the acquisition of a specific *boro* piece from Kawasaki Kei by the V&A in 2015. To see this *boro* robe, in June 2018 I visited the exhibition *Values of Design*, held by Design Society in Shekou, China. Design Society is a cultural hub established in 2018 as part of the partnership between the V&A Museum and China Merchants Shekou.<sup>74</sup> My visit was mainly to see how *boro* was displayed and interpreted within the theme of design, as this was quite a rare example of *boro* being exhibited outside either a Japanese or a repaired textiles context.

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<sup>74</sup> China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zoon Holdings Co., Ltd is a public company based in Shenzhen, China. It is a subsidiary of China Merchants Group.

In December 2018, I went to Japan again, as I had heard from the director of Amuse that the museum would close in March 2019. I hoped to revisit the exhibition and also to discuss the possibility of taking the *boro* exhibition to China. I also wanted to re-examine the question of the origins of *boro* in this second field trip by travelling to Aomori. In Aomori, I met Tanaka Chūzaburō's former assistant, Mikami Yōko, who now worked at Aomori Museum of History. Mikami gave me two catalogues of Tanaka's textile collections, in which word "*boro*" was never mentioned. I also consulted the director of Aomori Prefectural Museum, Masuta Kimiyasu, about a textile collection donated by Tanaka Chūzaburō's family to the museum.

I met with Tatsumi Kiyoshi at Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology (BIFT) in October 2019 when the *boro* collection was being shown at the Ethnic Costume Museum, BIFT. Before our meeting in Beijing, we had only communicated by email, and this was our first face-to-face interview. Tatsumi answered my questions about the curatorial collaboration for the *boro* exhibition in Beijing, and his reflections on the ten-year *boro* exhibition in Amuse Museum.

### ***Boro* Makers and Workshops**

My research into *boro* makers and *boro* workshops was mostly carried out in Japan, in flea market, crafts shops, studios and other sites where my interviewees worked or felt comfortable to talk. In the city of Chiba, I met *boro* maker Kami Hitoe at a warehouse of the Japan Fibre Recycling Solidarity Association, to examine his *boro* work using the second-hand T-shirts, hoodies, blazers and boots sold in this warehouse shop. I also talked to Oguni Tomokazu, the owner of the shop and friend of Kami Hitoe, about his thoughts on *boro* and his not-for-profit recycling project of shipping hundreds of tons of discarded clothes from Japan to Pakistan. Another *boro*-inspired artisan based in Chiba was Okuno Ryuichi, who moved from Tokyo to a mountain village near Ichihara Tsurumai. In his home and studio, an

Edo-period cottage he had refurbished himself, he showed me the process of making a tote bag with vintage *boro* fabrics he collected from Niigata. His narratives about *boro* and his change in lifestyle enabled me to form a broader understanding about creative interpretations that could be further developed.

On my way from Tokyo to Aomori, I made a brief stop in Sendai for a few hours to interview Sasaki Mitsugu, a *boro* maker who used vintage indigo cotton fabrics to recreate *boro* in Western fashion styles. Sasaki brought some examples of his work in order to explain his working process. His early interest in denim and Western vintage clothes inspired me to explore his influences from denim culture and vintage fashion to the resurgence of *boro* in Japan.

While in Tokyo, I visited Fukayama Yumiko at her temporary stall in the department store Tokyu Hands Shibuya, to find out more about what drives the *boro* style in Japan today. As the *boro* textile supplier for the established brand KUON, Fukayama also talked about her experience and offered her reflections on contemporary *boro* fashion.

In Tokyo I also interviewed Lindsey Gradolph in a tea-room near Mina Perhonen, a designer store selling ready-made clothes and fabrics, which inspire Gradolph in her work. In addition to talking about her work and thoughts with the examples she showed to me, Gradolph's experience showed me the impact of social media in promoting both a designer's work and the *boro* aesthetic to a huge audience in a short period of time. After our meeting, I followed her daily updates on Instagram, and was surprised to see her posting my questions and exchanging ideas with her followers.

Two visits to Amy Katoh provided further significant material for this thesis. Our first meeting was in her shop Blue and White, where she shared her observations about the current *boro* trend, and her thoughts about the collecting of others, such as Morita Tadashi, Kawasaki Kei and Stephen Szczepanek, based on these collectors' acquisitions and also their friendships

through her over thirty years of *boro* collecting experience. She was not a *boro* maker herself but operated more like a patron for those creative artisans, and in our interview, she introduced other *boro* collectors and artisans who would help my research. Our second meeting was at her home; she showed me how she used *boro* as interior decoration, and also gave me some limited access to some of her self-published books about *boro* and *mottainai* that are otherwise hard to obtain due to their limited print runs.

In addition to the interviews I conducted in Japan, I joined several workshops in London. During London Craft Week in 2018, I registered for a *boro* workshop organised by TOAST, a clothing store located in Notting Hill, and Ray Stitch shop, a haberdashery shop and sewing school in Islington, to conduct a participant observation of the different approaches to *boro*, and interpretations of it, from the perspective of a slow fashion theme workshop, though I was not able to conduct in-depth interviews with the organiser and participants. In July 2018, I joined another *boro* workshop with Rosie Boycott Brown at the Ray Stitch shop. I had a chance to talk with the participants while we were stitching. Their reflections on visible mending and sustainable fashion broadened my understanding of *boro* practices and contributed greatly to my research about the refashioned *boro*. In terms of other mending and repairing events, I observed a *kintsugi* workshop led by Nishikawa Iku at Wagumi, a Japanese design shop. The way that Nishikawa described *kintsugi* and the instructions she gave inspired me to think about more creative possibilities of *boro* beyond textiles. In common with *boro*, *kintsugi* and its contemporary applications in design provided another example of interpreting brokenness as an aesthetic.

Through a shared interest in *boro*, a global network of collectors, gallerists, and artisans were brought together in this research. Many of the participants generously shared information, offered suggestions, and facilitated access to collections, archives, and workshops. This

nomadic approach did have its limitations which potentially left out other narratives on *boro*, and omitted information from a rival *boro* network that might exist.

Another challenge in this research is language and translation. As a non-Japanese speaker, I was grateful to have translators to help me to communicate with some of the interviewees who did not speak English. The translators for this research speak Chinese as their mother language and Japanese as secondary, thus information could be lost in translation. For my interviewees who can speak English but with a degree of difficulty, it was also a problem. With their agreement, I would send an email with my questions before the interview, so my interviewees could be more relaxed during our conversations. Being reliant mainly on English for communication has helped me to focus on *boro* as a global phenomenon. But on the negative side, it has made it impossible for me to conduct research with the impoverished families of Aomori, and it has certainly limited how much I could work with Japanese voices.

## **Outline of Thesis Structure**

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One asks questions about what *boro* is or can be, to push the boundaries of discussion beyond *boro*'s original cultural contexts and to open up the sense of object knowledge that redefines the creative meanings and potential of *boro*. This chapter provides background information about patchwork in a global context, explores the development of Japanese patchwork, Japanese quilts, *sashiko* stitchery, and contemporary textile design practices that reflect the idea of *boro* and *mottainai* aesthetics. This chapter argues that, despite the fact that patchwork as a mending practice is universal in many cultures and has a long-established history, and it is only very recently that *boro* has received attention from scholars, special claims about Japan are still made through *boro* in terms of the country's geo-culture, folk crafts and aesthetic traditions.

Chapter Two investigates *boro* textiles as ethnographic objects that record the makers'

and wearers' everyday life and social evolution and considers the extent to which *boro* objects have been used by ethnographers to construct the idea of *boro* as an exclusively Japanese phenomenon. This chapter uses Tanaka Chūzaburō's collection as the central case study, focusing on the history of the Tōhoku region, a geographically remote region in north-eastern Honshū island, to find out how and why it is commonly believed that *boro* originated in this area, and how *boro* is defined in Japanese culture. This chapter will combine the history of Japanese textiles and an object analysis of *boro* pieces shown at Amuse Museum to explain the key features of *boro* designs, as well as the functional and aesthetic intentions behind them. The choice of indigo dye, *sashiko* needlework, pattern cutting and prints on patches are all related to the geological, social and cultural conditions that produce *boro* and sustain its appreciation in Japan now.

“What is *boro* in the Japanese context?” is the key question in Chapter Two. Three significant characteristics of *boro* – warmth, indigo dye and natural fibres – are highlighted through deconstructing the *kanji* expression of *boro*: 襤褸. These characteristics are discussed in relation to labour, environment, techniques and the repair mentality. Tanaka's collection created stories of *boro* in the Aomori region, yet there was not enough convincing evidence to show that Aomori is the only birthplace of *boro*. I argue that it is more important to find out the context in which the practice initially arose and what the textiles were responding to, rather than debating about their birthplace. The Tanaka collection is merely a tiny part of the *boro* made in villages in Japan. However, as this particular collection was on display to the public for almost ten years from 2008 to early 2019 in Amuse Museum, it is a good example for examining the changing attitudes of the Japanese people towards *boro* and the evolving sets of values this collection has represented. From an obscure exhibition visited mostly by elderly women to a show travelling widely overseas, we can see *boro* evolving into a symbol of Japanese culture and constructing ethnicity. The abandonment and resurrection of *boro* is not

accidental, but in tune with the tide of the times and people's needs. This chapter focuses on the way that Japan uses *boro* to make special claims about Japan, treating *boro* not merely as a revived folk craft created with love and care stories, but also as an imagined cultural treasure in response to the social climate and as a spiritual symbol of the country.

Chapter Three explores the “globalisation” of *boro* in North America, Europe, and Asia since the start of the twenty-first century, and examines the transcultural interpretations of *boro* objects when they are mediated by various agencies such as museums, art galleries, private collectors and design schools. Chapter Three traces the flow of Japanese patchwork through collecting activities and exhibitions throughout Japan and in Western countries. The first exhibition, at Ōsaka's ABC Gallery in 2000, offered people an opportunity to understand this domestic textile made decades ago, and also made *boro* into a collectable item in the antique textiles market. Its growing popularity gradually turned into a specific “*boro* aesthetic” which emphasised the appreciation of imperfection and a zero-waste attitude towards the resources we own. Since then, more *boro* exhibitions have been held overseas, in countries including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China and elsewhere. Using interviews with textile collectors, gallerists and museum curators, Chapter Three tracks the global flows of *boro* and provides an account of the public dissemination of *boro* to understand how *boro* is used, exhibited and interpreted in contemporary art and design fields today.

Chapter Four addresses the contemporary applications of *boro* in fashion and design industries. This chapter investigates how the accumulated values and meanings explored in the previous chapters have been adopted or reinvented by high-end fashion brands and anonymous artisans. *Boro* used to be worn as everyday clothing, and after decades of evolution, from discarded scraps to a type of collectable art, now *boro* is once again worn by people in a new form. The rebirth of *boro* in the present day produces the key question in this chapter: what are we doing when we do *boro* today? Through examining the re-fashioning process of *boro*,

Chapter Four opens discussions about the pathways of cultural continuity achieved through fashion and other creative practices and community involvement.

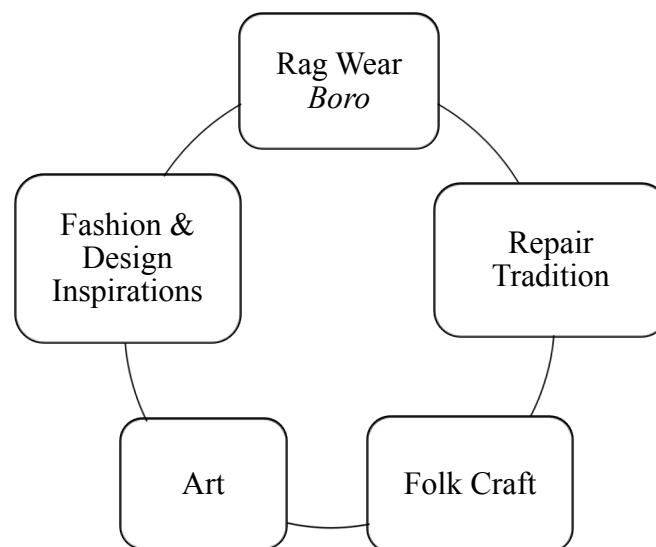
Chapter Four introduces the fashion designers whose work has been influenced by Japanese *boro* and its sartorial aesthetics. For example, Louis Vuitton's creative director Kim Jones enlisted the Japanese brand Kapital to produce *boro* denim jackets and shorts for his Spring/Summer 2013 menswear collection and Watanabe Junya introduced a *boro*-influenced patchwork menswear design in the Spring/Summer 2015 collection. The fashion labels investigated in this chapter include Kapital, KUON, Porter Classic, Visvim and Junya Watanabe. Using image analysis and interviews, the work of each designer and brand are examined in terms of brand storytelling, materials, construction techniques, and, where possible, actual garments, and if not, archival images.

The continuity of *boro* in contemporary society is also carried out by folk crafts practitioners and by creative communities, both online and in local neighbourhoods. Occupying separate circuits from the international art and collecting market, this new generation of *boro* makers collect vintage fabrics and yarns, cut and sew and wear or sell what they make, sharing their haptic knowledge and building a new *boro* culture in a contemporary context. The resurrection of *boro* in Japan as a style and a way of living follows the current trend for vintage clothing, and also benefits from the recognition of *boro* in Western fashion and design industries. Wearing *boro* is an expression of individuality, while making *boro* produces connections: these are the values of *boro* that have been recreated by contemporary fashion and *boro* makers.



## Final Introductory Remarks

Today, *boro* textiles are regarded as valuable antiques and collectable art pieces. In a society where machine-made textiles are easy and cheap to obtain, the hunt for what feels authentic becomes a challenge, and history becomes a part of the object's value. While researching this project, I have tried to include the contemporary development of *boro* within its history. The overall structure of the thesis also developed similarly to the life cycle of *boro*, progressing from unconsciously “designed” clothes made by poor families to a recognisable aesthetic showcased in fashion weeks all round the world (Figure 6). My thesis begins with a deconstruction of *boro* into separate directions in terms of historical, material, technical, and cultural analysis. It further reconstructs *boro* through theoretical revaluation, aesthetic repositioning, and refashioning practices, eventually to complete a revival of this “rubbish”.



**Figure 6.** Diagram of the thesis structure

*Boro* is an intimate way of touching the life and history of a textile, and all of the other hands that have touched that same cloth. The development of *boro* provides us with an example of a hybrid form of new culture, which is created through the material flows and mutual relations between various cultures. Amy Sylvester Katoh, one of my interviewees, said that in

the world of *boro*, no one is truly an expert: it is all about interpretation.<sup>75</sup> This is a topic about co-creation in culture, and so is the research itself. It makes no claim to be either the first or the last word on *boro*, but it does seek to illuminate the subject and to provide a basis for further research and discussion.

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<sup>75</sup> Amy Sylvester Katoh. Interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Tokyo, Japan, 4/12/2018.

## Chapter One. The Definition of *Boro*: A Patchwork Approach

### Introduction

Patchwork has its origins in both recycling and ornamentation. However, discussions of *boro* usually pay more attention to the former. In fact, definitions of *boro* can encompass more than these two notions. This chapter creates a synthesis of different approaches to patchwork cultures and attempts to arrive at an expanded sense of what *boro* is and what *boro* can be. I begin this chapter by probing the general history of patchwork and the differences between patchwork, appliqué and quilting. Because *boro* has often been included as examples of these three techniques, I will first clarify these terminologies before discussing the definition of *boro*. I go on to analyse the linguistic meanings of *boro*, which include a cross-disciplinary understanding of the term. This analysis only translates the term from its meanings, and extracts information from its *kanji* form.

The third part investigates the changing narratives of “Japanese patchwork”, from the *kesa* robes worn by Buddhist monks and priests to the converging of Japanese patchwork with the Western “crazy” patchwork. Patchwork, Japanese quilting and *sashiko* also went through a resurgence and reimagining in Japan through a cross-cultural borrowing from, and sharing with, American quilts. The successful promotion of *sashiko* to the global quilting field paved the way for the future acceptance of *boro*. Then, through the introduction of the philosophical term *mottainai* into the construction of its meaning, along with exhibitions overseas, *boro* gradually became identified as a Japanese aesthetic and as a cultural symbol of the nation.

In the last section, *boro* is read beyond the original context that has been explored in previous sections. Drawing on examples of a thatched “*boro*” roof and the textiles designed by NUNO, this section envisions *boro* as having creative possibilities, and it argues that *boro* is not limited to certain materials: it can also be considered an intervention into materials.

Through the studies above, this chapter opens up the discussion about the meanings of *boro* in a cross-cultural context. Investigations of Japanese patchwork, quilts, *sashiko* and *mottainai* offer both textile and historical knowledge to better understand the evolution of *boro*.

## **Classifications of Patchwork, Appliqué and Quilt**

Before considering the different configurations of *boro* that construct its storied history, it would be useful to first unpack the intricate web of relationships between patchwork, appliqué and quilting. *Boro* is often referred to as a “patchwork style”, and sometimes it will also appear in articles about quilting and appliqué as a patching technique.<sup>1</sup> This chapter offers a necessary clarification of this terminology because *boro* has been frequently referred to in books and online articles, while the definitions are often confused.

Patchwork, as a mending practice, is universal in many cultures, and this section relates Western patchwork-appliqué-quilting traditions to examples from Japanese contexts, to enrich an understanding of patchwork that has mostly been exemplified by Western handcraft. Patchwork is created when a new fabric is cut and reshaped into small pieces, or old pieces are cut and re-stitched to produce a new textile. The distinct visual impression of patchwork as a form of visible mending can enable an intimate engagement with the nostalgic, and with expressions of handcraft. In addition to the purpose of mending, patchwork also has decorative applications in many cultures. For example, patchwork was used in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France to make religious banners, decorative hangings and rugs.<sup>2</sup> Nikki Tinkler observes that the modern revival of interest in patchwork and quilt-making has seen its history

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Bryant, “All About Boro – The Story of Japanese Patchwork,” *Heddels*, August 31, 2015, available at: <https://www.heddels.com/2015/08/all-about-boro-story-japanese-patchwork/>. Mary Ray, “Learn the Art of Japanese Boro for Garment Quilting,” *Threads* magazine, March 22, 2018, available at: <https://www.threadsmagazine.com/2018/03/22/boro-style>.

<sup>2</sup> Janine Janniere, “Filling in Quilt History: a 16<sup>th</sup> Century French Patchwork Banner.” *The Quilt Journal* 3: 1. (1994), p.2.

develop into something more sophisticated in terms of the use of colour, fabric and design.<sup>3</sup> The uses and meanings of patchwork change with society, and there are certain turning points that separate patchwork from domestic mending work when it is transformed into a diverse variety of expressions and reinterpretations.

In Europe, the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century marked a division in the social recognition of patchwork.<sup>4</sup> Before the industrial production of textiles, cloth was a precious commodity to be used sparingly. Small left-over pieces of precious silk or velvet, or other costly cloth, would be remade into new clothing or household objects. Apart from its decorative purpose, patchwork made in this period was also used for the purposes of repair. During the second half of the nineteenth century, patchwork became a common leisure activity. Making patchwork became a popular domestic craft for gentlewomen that was widespread through Europe and North America.<sup>5</sup> Patchwork at that time was normally constructed by stitching random patches to a fabric base, incorporating snippets of the velvets, brocades, silks and satins that were used to make clothing during the period as well as the fancy braids and ribbons that were available to the more affluent members of society. Stitched textiles played an essential part in the comfort and decoration of the home and were an opportunity for women to express their creativity.

Patchwork also provided a medium for storytelling. Large-scale pieces used quilting and appliqué techniques to create pictorial images, such as that seen in Figure 1, a pieced and appliquéd quilt owned by a family in Acton, London, in 1825. I saw this piece, known as “the Acton top”, in the exhibition *Treasured Threads: Unpicking Gunnersbury’s Quilts* held at Gunnersbury Park Museum in 2019-20. The design includes a frame and a central embroidered and appliquéd bowl of flowers with butterflies and birds, a popular design in the early

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<sup>3</sup> Nikki Tinkler, *The Patchworker’s and Quilter’s Stitch Bible* (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 2006), p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Crabtree and Christine Shaw, *Quilting, Patchwork & Applique* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

nineteenth century. Rosettes of elongated hexagons are surrounded by a second border depicting four biblical scenes and eight figures in contemporary Regency dress, animals, and baskets of fish and plants. Using the appliqué technique, the small pieces are stitched to tell the Biblical stories of Christ and the Samaritan woman and Elijah and the poor widow.<sup>6</sup> Scenes and quotations from the Bible were commonly included in Western patchwork designs, for instructional purposes and to demonstrate piety. The outer border of the patchwork top is composed of pieced clamshells separating lines of equilateral triangles, and four pieced stars or hexagon rosettes in roundels. The words “patchwork” and “quilt” are in many cases interchangeable. For example, in the exhibition the wall text described the piece as a “patchwork top”, and in other books it is referred to as a “quilt top”.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1.** Top 2894, The Acton Top, c. 1825  
Photo courtesy of Gunnersbury Park Museum.

<sup>6</sup> “Top 2894, The Acton Top, c. 1825 donated by Miss Graham”, wall text. In exhibition *Treasured Thread: Unpicking Gunnersbury’s Quilts*, shown at Gunnersbury Park Museum from 15 October 2019 to 12 January 2020. Visited on 17 November 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Roddy Brown, *Patchwork-Play Quilts: Making the Most of Scraps, Spare Parts and Leftovers* (Bothell: Martingale & Co, 2011), p. 6.

Although closely linked to patchwork, quilting is another craft technique with its own history, which can be traced back at least to medieval times. The word “quilt” was derived from the Latin *culcita*, meaning a sack, mattress, or cushion filled with feathers, wool or hair that was used as covering for warmth.<sup>8</sup> Quilts are created by sewing layers of fabric together, and quilting is a method of stitching layers which often uses running stitches in parallel lines following the perimeters of a patch. To differentiate between quilts and patchwork from a design perspective, quilts are often associated with their use as bed covers; therefore, they are usually made of two layers of fabric with a padding (wadding, or batting) layer in between. Patchwork is normally the decorative layer, which is a flat design, made from more elaborate sections that were appliquéd over the solid background of the quilt. From a functional perspective, quilting is usually associated with warmth, protection and social occasions shared by a group of people sewing together. Patchwork is more often linked to domestic economy as a way of extending the lifespan of clothing and reusing scraps of fabric, which relates more closely to *boro*.

Appliqué is commonly defined as the cutting and placing of a piece of fabric on a background for adornment and decoration. However, appliqué has not always been used for adornment – in its earliest form it was functional, strengthening a worn area with another piece of cloth.<sup>9</sup> It has been argued that appliqué was less commonly used as a decorative technique in Japan because of the stencil and resist-dyeing technique for garment decoration that had developed there.<sup>10</sup> However, in search of *boro* in its alleged birthplace, Aomori, in the Aomori Prefectural Museum I found examples of Ainu robes decorated with appliqué designs (Figure 2). The spiritual motifs appliquéd on the ceremonial robes were made in the belief that they

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<sup>8</sup> Thelma R. Newman, *Quilting, Patchwork, Appliqué and Trapunto: Traditional Methods and Original Designs* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1974), p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Crabtree and Christine Shaw, *Quilting, Patchwork & Applique* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p.13.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Liddell and Yuko Watanabe, “Threads of History”, in: *Japanese Quilts* (London: Studio Vista, 1988), p.10.

would protect the wearers. Although the Ainu robe cannot speak for Japanese appliqué tradition, this example shows the decorative and religious uses of appliqué in an indigenous ethnic group of people living in Hokkaidō in Japan. And in contemporary appliqué practices, the Japanese needlework technique of *sashiko* has also been the inspiration for much creative work.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2.** Front view of an Ainu robe  
Collected by Aomori Prefectural Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li

Patchwork, quilting and appliqué all began as a functional solution and gradually developed into more decorative applications. These techniques are often seen on a same piece, so this section's main aim is to provide a conceptual differentiation between them. It also explains some of the confusion surrounding *boro*'s connection with patchwork, quilting and appliqué. The characteristics of these three techniques are all embodied by *boro* or are related to the history of *boro*. It is also important to note at the start of this chapter that *boro* is not the only patchwork history that emphasises its humble beginnings. For example, we can find a

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Pippen, *Paradise Stitched-Sashiko and Appliqué Quilts* (Lafayette, CA: C & T Publishing, 2010).



similar story in understandings of American quilt-making. When the quilts brought by the first colonists were worn out, salvageable scraps of material, from whatever source, were sewn together to make usable, warm bedding.<sup>12</sup>

Some authors construct a parallel story to the trajectory of *boro*, suggesting that patchwork in Western culture also had a stigma of poverty attached to it. For example, Michele Walker writes that many people preferred not to be associated with owning patchwork quilts, even though they were made as a labour of love and care.<sup>13</sup> Unlike *boro*, many patchwork pieces and quilts were not discarded, but were well documented and passed down from generation to generation. The pioneering spirit and nostalgia for the Colonial period in America would play important roles in the construction of American national identity and create a social space for American quilts to become part of American cultural heritage. However, *boro* followed a very different trajectory from that of American quilts, although they share many similarities in certain ways. The following sections will first provide a linguistic explanation of the term *boro*, and then investigate the definition of *boro* within the changing narrative of Japanese patchwork.

## **A Linguistic Analysis of *Boro***

Anglophone publications stress that the meaning of *boro* can be found in its literal translation, “rags” or “ragged”.<sup>14</sup> However, when I first encountered the term “*boro*”, it reminded me of other popular Japanese crafts, such as *sashiko*. Just as the written Japanese

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: Selections from the Collection of Jonathan Holstein and Gail Van Der Woof* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971), p.7.

<sup>13</sup> Michele Walker, *The Passionate Quilter* (London: Ebury Press, 1990), p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Yukiko Koide and Kyōichi Tsuzuki, *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan* (Tokyo: ASPECT Corp., 2009). [unpaginated]

form of *sashiko* is “刺し子”, I wondered if *boro* had an expression in written Japanese, and what does it mean? What information can we get from its literal expression?



**Figure 3.** Literal explanation of *boro* in Japanese and Chinese

The Japanese *hiragana* for “*boro*” is “ぼろ”. “ぼろ”, which is both a noun and an adjective: it indicates scraps and tattered clothes, and the term ‘*boro-boro*’ is also used to describe an extensively used and worn state of being. The *kanji* form of “ぼろ” is “褌褌”, which also corresponds to the Chinese language written form “褌褌” [*lán lǚ*]. In Chinese, the word is used mostly as an idiom. For example, a literal translation of the “衣衫褌褌 (*yī shān lán lǚ*)” means “ragged clothes” but could also be used to describe someone’s shabby dressing style, or as a metaphor for being down and out.

The written form “褌褌” consists of three components which are quite straightforward in conveying the three elements of *boro*: materials, colours and function. Firstly, both characters start with the same radical “衤” which represents things related to fabrics, garments and dress codes. “衤” itself is also a character derived from “衣”, and both words mean “clothes”. Secondly, parts of the character “褌” are the same as the character “藍”, which in Chinese shares an identical pronunciation (*lán*), and means “blue”. Furthermore, the word “褌” refers to fibres, threads and any tiny components of a piece of cloth. The meanings blue,

clothing and threads also apply to the Japanese language analysis of the *kanji* for *boro*, thus the major characteristics and functions of *boro* – warm clothing, indigo dye and visible threads - are embedded into its definition and will lead the research directions in this chapter.

The Japanese *hiragana* ぼろ (the romanisation of “*boro*”) is referred to as “*boro*” in English, and “*lán lǚ*” in Chinese. “Patchwork and darning” can be translated as *tsugihagi* in Japanese. In museums and art galleries where *boro* has been displayed, it has been referred to as “*tsugihagi-boro*” “つぎはぎ(*tsugihagi*) 襤褸”, “vintage Japanese patchwork” or “藍染古布 (indigo-dyed vintage cloth)”.<sup>15</sup> The original meaning of *boro* describes the ragged condition of textiles, and in this case, a single piece of worn-out fabric could be referred to as *boro*. In local flea markets, textile sellers would call it “*bodo*” or other pronunciations, depending on their regional accents. For example, it would be referred to as “*bodoko*” in Tōhoku region.



**Figure 4.** vintage indigo fabrics sold in Tokyo boroichi market  
Photograph by Leren Li

<sup>15</sup> *Tsugihagi boro*, collected by Gallery Kojima. *Gallery Kojima*, available at: <https://www.gallery-kojima.jp/boro/boro/1076-boro/>

Language provides other clues about how *boro* has fitted into complex networks of exchange, linking people's daily activities in which there are many ways to use the term "*boro*" according to the circumstances. Although the meanings of *boro* have been produced in a transnational context, it is difficult to isolate *boro* from a Japanese context. Like other East Asian languages, Japanese is rich in repeated syllable onomatopoeia. Thus, *boro* is often used in its adjective form, "*boroboro*", to describe both an object and a person in a similar physical or mental condition. In "Boro Boro: Cruel and Unusual Treatment of Fabrics", archaeologist Richard Hodges connects the exploratory process of fabric manufacture and archaeology by describing both activities as searching for and sensing textures in our world.<sup>16</sup> From the processes that cloth has undergone, such as lamination, burn-out, felting and chemical lacework, Hodges defines the term "*boroboro*" as:

1. ragged, tattered, worn-out, dilapidated
2. in rags, in tatters, in shreds, in ribbons
3. crumbly, brittle, fragile
4. falling (reduced) to pieces, worn to rags (a frazzle), frayed (at the edge)<sup>17</sup>

*Boro Boro* is one of the series of six books that survey the textiles created by the Japanese textile company NUNO. The publications are in both Japanese and English, and each book covers an attribute of the textiles manufactured by the company. At the beginning of each book is a short essay or story by a contributor from outside the textile's context, in this case archaeologist Richard Hodges, to offer some unique and abstract connections to the theme of each book. Hodges' definition of *boro* sounds negative and relatively passive. It is not that *boro* itself was mistreated, but that struggle and hardship has brought out a particular character in the inanimate object. Hodges' interpretation of *boro* serves as an example of the way a Japanese textile brand used non-Japanese people from outside the industry to give *boro* an international value. Nowadays, *boro* has become a symbolic image of "Japanese patchwork":

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Hodges, "Boro boro: Cruel and Unusual Treatment of Fabrics", in: Kazuyoshi Sudo and Alfred Birnbaum (eds.), *Boro Boro* (Tokyo: NUNO Corporation, 1997), p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

but what is Japanese patchwork? The next section will trace the changing narratives of Japanese patchwork and the implications of *boro*.

## The Changing Narratives of Japanese Patchwork

In Japanese, patchwork is sometimes translated as *tsugihagi*, which refers to the patching and darning work to keep a thing last. Patchwork's development in Japan could be traced back to the *kesa*, the rectangular or trapezoidal piece traditionally worn by Buddhist monks and priests. In the exhibition *Boro: The Fabric of Life*, held in Cologne in 2015, the exhibition linked the origin of *boro* to the *kesa*, and some textile collectors also consider the *kesa* to be the precursor of *boro*.<sup>18</sup> Originally, the *kesa* did share certain similarities with *boro*, as a symbol of humility, stitched together from discarded scraps of fabric, as Buddhist teaching commanded.<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically, with increasing donations of magnificent cloth from wealthy patrons of Buddhist temples, the *kesa* became more sumptuous over time.<sup>20</sup> As veneration to the Buddha's doctrine, clothing was often given to the monks as whole items. However, monks were expected to make *kesas* out of patches: they still had to cut the clothing up into pieces and sew it together in patchwork form.<sup>21</sup> Although many existing *kesa* pieces are still in good condition and are made of some expensive materials such as silk and lampas, the *kesa* still exemplifies early Japanese patchwork, which sheds light on the Japanese aesthetics of recycling.

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<sup>18</sup> Helen Terry, "Boro: The Fabric of Life", *Helen Terry* [blog], August 3, 2015, available at: <http://www.helenterryart.co.uk/blog/2015/8/2/boro-the-fabric-of-life> [Accessed 11 December 2019]

"Boro: The Fabric of Life", *Mountain Folkcraft*, April 24, 2015, available at: <https://mountainfolkcraft.com/2015/04/24/boro-fabric-of-live-exhibition/>

<sup>19</sup> Alan Kennedy, "Kesa: Its Sacred and Secular Aspects," *Textile Museum Journal* 22 (1983), p.67-71.

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Brittenham, "The Gift of Cloth: Highlights of Yale's Japanese Textile Collection." *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2007), p.148-53.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Gibson, "Venerating Buddha, from Rags to Riches", *The New York Times*, November 28, 1992, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/28/style/IHT-venerating-buddha-from-rags-to-riches.html>.



**Figure 5.** Silk remnants from kimono to make *kesa*  
 Source: *Transmitting Robes, Linking Minds – The World of Buddhist Kasaya*  
 Exhibition Catalogue<sup>22</sup>

Another example is an inner kimono, called a *dōnuki* in Japanese (Figure 6). Not all *dōnuki* are made in patchwork form, and the patching technique of this piece is called *yosegire*, which means “sewing the fragments together” in Japanese. Compared with *boro*, the skill required to sew this under-kimono is more sophisticated.<sup>23</sup> As shown in the example, creating a harmonious balance from a disparate selection of fabrics and achieving a rich visual effect were important in making an under-kimono. Moreover, the under-kimono is made with a mixture of silk and cotton. The overall look of the garment was not overly glamorous, but the

<sup>22</sup> Exhibition Catalogue. *Kōsō to Kesa: Koromo o Tsutae Kokoro o Tsunagu (Kōsō to Kesa: Communicate with Cloth and Weaving with Heart)*. (Kyoto: Kyoto National Museum, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Anna Jackson (ed.), *Kimono: The Art and Evolution of Japanese Fashion*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), p.137.

details were thoughtfully designed through the predominant use of stencil dyeing, and feature symbols of birds, butterflies and bamboo.

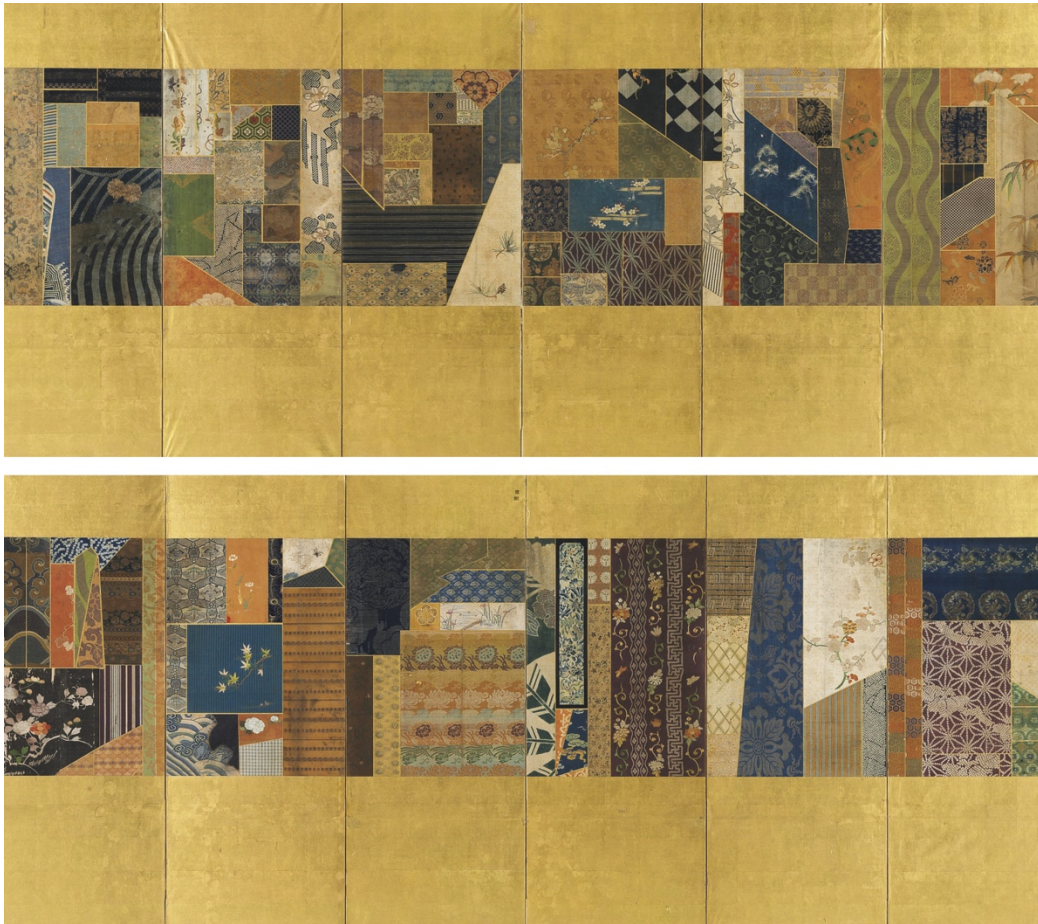


**Figure 6.** Under-Kimono  
Place of Origin: Japan (made)  
Date: 1890-1910 (made)  
Source: Victoria & Albert Museum Collection

In the early nineteenth century, *yosegire* patchwork enjoyed a close similarity to the current revival of *boro* in fashion. The original intention of *yosegire* was to preserve and extend the life of valuable fabrics. However, around the 1830s, women began to take up *yosegire* as a pastime. They took tremendous pleasure from patching together cloth of various colours, textures and shapes, simply to make decorative clothing, screens and other household items.<sup>24</sup> This form of *yosegire* provided an early image of “Japanese patchwork”, and in the history of Western patchwork, *yosegire* patchwork and the “cracked aesthetics” are believed by some scholars to be a style that ignited the Western fashion for crazy patchwork.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Jill Liddell and Yuko Watanabe, *Japanese Quilts* (London: Studio Vista, 1988), p.7.

<sup>25</sup> Spike Gillespie, *Quilts around the World: The Story of Quilting from Alabama to Zimbabwe* (Minneapolis, MN: Voyageur Press, 2010), p.151.



**Figure 7.** Yosegire Byobu (Patchwork screen)  
 Pair of six-panel screens; textile fragments and gold leaf on paper  
 Photography courtesy the Christie's

The story linking Japanese patchwork and crazy patchwork (Figure 8) focuses on the late nineteenth century, when crazy quilts became popular across America following the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition.<sup>26</sup> The Japanese Pavilion at the exhibition offered American audiences their first direct encounter with Japanese material culture in the form of painted screens, needlework, porcelain, furniture and lacquerware. Shelves filled with Japanese porcelain and pottery captivated attendees: as author J.S. Ingram wrote, “the entire exhibit of both porcelain and pottery made by all the other countries of the world did not furnish so great a variety in forms and styles of ornamentation as Japan alone showed.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> “Crazy Quilts: A Patchwork of Culture and Memories”, *State Museum of Pennsylvania*, March 24, 2015, available at: <http://statemuseumpa.org/crazy-quilts/>. Accessed on June 24, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> J.S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition: Described and Illustrated: Being a Concise and Graphic Description of This Grand Enterprise Commemorative of the First Centenary of American Independence* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros, 1876), p.561.





**Figure 8.** Quilt, crazy pattern (ca. 1883)  
 Made in Ridgefield, Connecticut, United States  
 Photography courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art<sup>28</sup>

There are different voices speaking about the Japanese inspiration for the Western crazy patchwork. Some quilt historians believe that crazy patchwork was influenced by Japanese porcelain, with its cracked finish, and they referred to Japanese porcelain design as having a “crazing” or “cracked ice” effect.<sup>29</sup> Other scholars argue that the influence might have come from Japanese textiles. In her book *Crazy Patchwork*, quilt scholar Penny McMorris points out that it may have been a screen (or perhaps a group of screens), exhibited in the Japanese pavilion that “provided the design influence that came to maturity in the crazy quilt. Some of the screens exhibited there were described as being covered with textured gilt paper ornamented with patches of various materials that had painted, embroidered, or quilted

<sup>28</sup> The example was a mother-daughter project donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Dr Grace V. Gorham. The donor believed this piece was made by her mother, Ellie Keeler Gorham, and grandmother, Elizabeth Hickok Keeler.

<sup>29</sup> Margret Aldrich and Whitney Otto, *This Old Quilt: a Heartwarming Celebration of Quilts and Quilting Memories* (Minnesota, MN: Voyageur Press, 2001), p.114.

designs.”<sup>30</sup> There is no direct evidence to prove that Japanese art was the origin of crazy patchwork, but America’s fascination with Japanese art created a new style in crazy quilting, referred to as “Japanese patchwork”.<sup>31</sup>

Nine years after the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, in *Weldon’s Practical Patchwork*, published in 1885, this is how crazy patchwork was explained:

Crazy patchwork, also called Kaleidoscope or Japanese Patchwork, takes its name from the haphazard arrangement of various pieces of bright-coloured silk, which are joined by equally various stitches in assorted shades of embroidery silk, wool, or cottons. It permits of using up every possible variety and size scraps, and perhaps for this very reason, as well as the excellent effect gained, it has so quickly grown popular.<sup>32</sup>

The articles in this edition didn’t explicitly discuss the origins of Japanese patchwork and its correlation with crazy patchwork, but there are some common traits in Japanese patchwork that were shown in the illustrations. In the examples marked as Japanese patchwork, the patches are mostly made by hand-embroidered motifs instead of dyed patterns, as Figure 8 shows. This arrangement of the crazy patchwork was given a decidedly “Japanese” effect,<sup>33</sup> as art historian Barbara J. Morris points out. The “Japanese” effect indicates not only the haphazard arrangement of the patches, but also the embroidering of Japanese-style motifs, such as flowers, stars, birds, spider’s webs, and clouds.

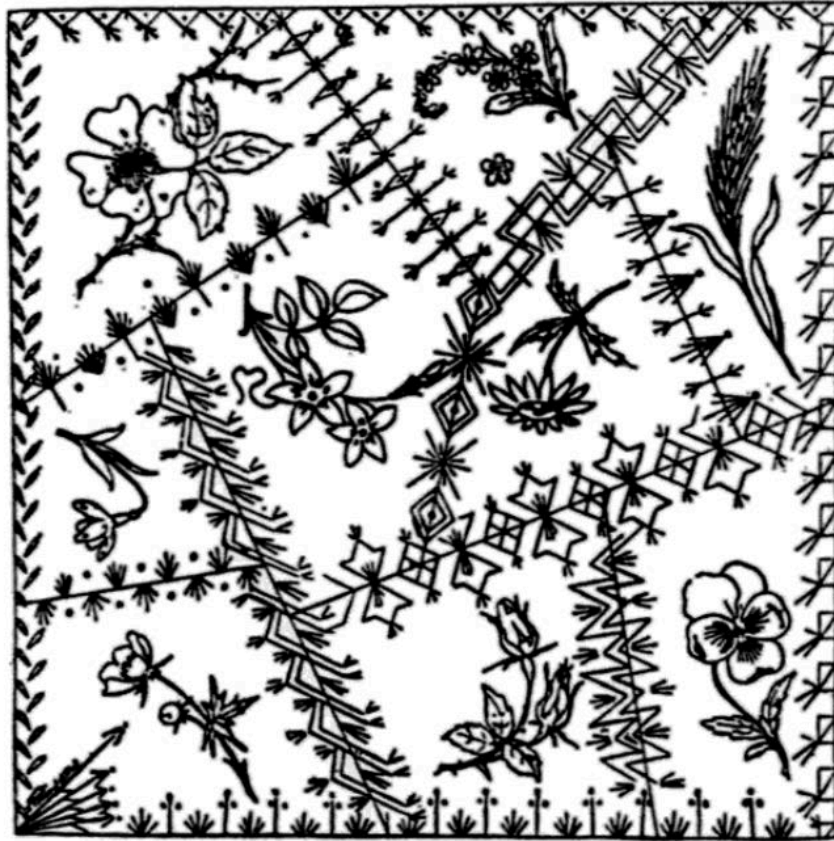
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<sup>30</sup> Penny McMorris, *Crazy Patchwork* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), p.12.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Cox Crews, "Fueled by Silk: Victorian Crazy Quilt Mania", in: *Proceedings, Textile Society of America Symposium 2010*, 15, available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/15>

<sup>32</sup> *Weldon’s Practical Patchwork*, Vol.1, No.5 (London: Weldon’s Limited, 1885), p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara J. Morris, *Victorian Embroidery: an Authoritative Guide*. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p.67.



**Figure 9.** Embroidery Design for Crazy or Japanese Patchwork  
Photograph from *Weldon's Practical Patchwork*

The motifs and refined needlework techniques could be evidence of Japanese patchwork within the crazy patchwork context. In *The Dictionary of Needlework*, published in 1882, Caulfeild and Saward explained to readers in two pages about the definitions of “Japanese embroidery” and instructions for sewing it, and they highlighted the speciality of Japanese embroidery in terms of its delicate motifs. They asserted that “Japanese workers are able to compete with most nations in their figure, bird, and flower designs, and in the marvellous manner they produce, with a few lines, a distant landscape or foreground object, subordinate to the centre figure.”<sup>34</sup> In the late nineteenth century, Japanese embroidery had earned a reputation internationally. Aside from the artistic influences from Japanese porcelain

<sup>34</sup> Sophia Caulfeild and Blanche Saward, *The Dictionary of Needlework: An Encyclopaedia of Artistic, Plain and Fancy Needlework* (London: L. Upcott Gill, 1882), p.276.

or textiles, the employment of the embroidery techniques might offer another reason why crazy patchwork was known as “Japanese” patchwork.

This section has discussed the changing narratives of Japanese patchwork within Japan and overseas. Within Japan, patchwork cultures were far wider than the celebration of *boro* and *sashiko* suggests. Once Japan was reopened to the world in the mid-nineteenth century, the exchange of art and crafts began and led to a converging of cultures. Japanese aesthetics were infused into the Western crazy patchwork, and Western patchwork also had an impact in Japan. The next section will take a closer look at *sashiko* stitching through examples of Japanese quilts.

## **Japanese Quilts and *Sashiko* Stitchery**

From the definition clarified in the first section of this chapter, quilting is simply joining layers of fabrics together by stitching them through. This textile craft was elevated from bedcovers to museum art in 1971 when the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted the exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*.<sup>35</sup> The quilts in this exhibition were drawn mostly from the nineteenth century, collected by quilt scholars Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof. It was a risky decision for the Whitney to exhibit works that were typically considered as craft or folk art on the walls of an art gallery. But by that time, due to the expanding definitions of art, many audiences were accustomed to seeing non-“high” art forms treated in this way.<sup>36</sup> The influence of this exhibition in the United States, as a review from *The New York Times* put it, was in “not only displaying unusual visual pleasures, but prompting us to rethink the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as the lesser forms of visual

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<sup>35</sup> Karin Elizabeth Peterson. "Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of the Patchwork Quilt", *Sociological Perspectives* 46: 4 (2003), p.461-90. Accessed April 9, 2020. doi:10.1525/sop.2003.46.4.461.

<sup>36</sup> “Abstract Design in American Quilts”, *World Quilts: The American Story*, available at: <http://worldquilts.quiltstudy.org/americanstory/creativity/abstractdesign>

expression.”<sup>37</sup> To some extent, the resurgence of *boro* in Japan in the twenty-first century is similar to the “renaissance” in the appreciation of quilts in American fine art in many ways.

There is little writing on the similarities between American quilts and Japanese *boro*, but in the catalogue for the exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, the stories told about American quilts and quilt-makers show some traits that also applied to the development of *boro* in Japan. First, in the catalogue Holstein suggests that the origin of American quilts was the result of the necessity for survival, as there was no native cloth industry in America, “little cloth coming from Europe, and the rigorous climate demanded warm bed clothing.”<sup>38</sup> Because of the limited materials available to make quilts, Holstein believed that the first quilts made in America were “almost certainly ‘crazy’ or random patterned, from whatever source, sewn together into useable covers.”<sup>39</sup> Secondly, female labour and family bonds were also reflected in this exhibition. Holstein writes, for example, about little girls being taught to sew, and devoted housewives making textiles for their families. These stories are similar to the oral histories of *boro* collected by Japanese folklorist Tanaka Chūzaburō.

Beside the storied origins that *boro* and American quilts had in common, they also shared a similar path in their refashioning processes. In historian Janneken Smucker’s book on Amish quilts, she writes about the market growth of quilts in auction houses after the Whitney’s exhibition. As she observes, prior to the 1970s art and antiques dealers and interior decorators were the primary bidders at Christie’s and Sotheby’s. However, by the 1980s, “the presence of a new generation of young collectors interested in various American antiques and folk art had transformed auction houses into retail markets where consumers and gallery dealers bid against

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<sup>37</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Art: Quilts Find a Place at the Whitney,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1971, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/03/archives/art-quilts-find-a-place-at-the-whitney.html>. Accessed on 7 Feb 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Holstein, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

one another.”<sup>40</sup> The increasing value of quilts, both financially and aesthetically, led to their revival in fashion. In the Whitney exhibition, Holstein pointed out that fashion influenced the look of pieced quilts. Most quilts were made from second-hand clothes-making scraps, so the materials, hues and prints of the quilts would directly reflect the trends of their times.<sup>41</sup> However, when quilts were not made as a necessity for living, they turned back to influence fashion. In 1989, US *Vogue*'s editor Laurie Schechter listed six designer pieces that embraced the crazy patchwork look (Figure 10).<sup>42</sup> The similar refashioning process of *boro* and its implications will be further investigated in Chapter Four, and in this section the research will focus on the influence of American quilts in Japan during the 1970s and 1980s that may have been an important factor in changing attitudes towards hand embroidery and the reuse of scrap waste.



**Figure 10.** Patchwork Looks.  
*Vogue USA*, 1989, 179:7.

<sup>40</sup> Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2017), p.127.

<sup>41</sup> Holstein, p.8.

<sup>42</sup> Laurie Schechter, “View: Patchwork Looks”, *Vogue USA*, 179:7 (1989), p.35.

In 1976, the Whitney exhibition travelling to the Shiseido Art Gallery in Tokyo marked an important change in Japanese contemporary quilting. Quilt researcher Watanabe Yuko, co-author of *Japanese Quilts*, writes, “we Japanese have traditionally cherished old fabrics, and the idea of creating something artistic and useful from scraps appealed to memory of a way of life that had seemed destined to be lost forever.”<sup>43</sup> Following the Whitney’s quilts exhibition, in 1985 another show of American quilts, this time from the collections of the Shelburne Museum, came to Japan; and in 1989, Denver Art Museum brought the collection of quilts from the Colorado Quilt Council to exhibit in Japan.<sup>44</sup> It was not only these exhibitions that visited Japan; in her interviews with dozens of quilters in Japan, Teresa Duryea Wong included the television version of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* in her research as another inspiration for Japanese women to take up quilting in the 1970s.<sup>45</sup>

These occurrences in the late twentieth century prompted further educational exchanges between the United States and Japan, and Japanese quilters had opportunities to travel abroad and exchange their knowledge with quilters in America.<sup>46</sup> Yuko Watanabe found that one of the changes resulting from the exchange of craftsmanship was that many Japanese quilters were interested in using the English paper piecing method, as it was a more efficient way to manage different-shaped patches.<sup>47</sup> From Watanabe’s book, quilting was not unknown in Japan before the American quilters’ works were seen, and the retrieved quilting memory in Japan provides an example of the integration between global trends and local identities. Inspired by American quilts, Japan reimagined the idea of quilting and developed a new Japanese quilt tradition which reflected both Japanese and American aesthetics.

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<sup>43</sup> Jill Liddell and Yuko Watanabe, *Japanese Quilts* (London: Studio Vista, 1988), p. xi.

<sup>44</sup> Kei Kobayashi, *The Quilt (Shelburne Museum)* (Tokyo: Gakken, 1985); Akio Kawamoto, *Quilt Colorado in Japan* (Tokyo: Kokusai Art, 1989).

<sup>45</sup> Teresa Duryea Wong, *Japanese Contemporary Quilts and Quilters: The Story of an American Import* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Gillespie, p.153.

<sup>47</sup> Liddell and Watanabe, p. xi.

To offer Japanese quilting techniques to quilt-makers in the West, in 1989 Nihon Vogue published a 42-page English manual of traditional Japanese quilt designs made with *sashiko* stitching. The presentation of the finished *sashiko* pieces in the book convey a combination of Japanese aesthetics and the Western lifestyle. For example, a *sashiko* stitched table cloth was put under a modern coffee pot and cup, with a line of text noting that “they go so very well together, and *sashiko* designs are suitable for Western style rooms, not only Japanese rooms.”<sup>48</sup> In 1990, a former fashion designer, Kobayashi Kei, organised the exhibition *Made in Japan: American Influences on Japanese Quilts* at the New England Quilt Museum: he was the first person to bring Japanese quilts to the United States.<sup>49</sup> In 1990 another promoter, Kokusai Art, an exhibition organiser and publisher based in Tokyo which had sponsored the Denver Art Museum quilts exhibition in Japan, published an Italian catalogue entitled *Beauty in Japanese Quilts* and organised exhibitions of Japanese quilts that travelled to a number of museums in the United States.<sup>50</sup> Regarding the reinterpretation of American quilts in Japan, Robert Shaw comments that “the Japanese have discovered much about the American way of life through quilts and quilt making, while at the same time they have preserved their own country’s equally rich textile and craft traditions.”<sup>51</sup> And in the effort to re-export Japanese quilts to the world, *sashiko* became a signature technique which was deeply rooted in Japanese culture and well accepted by quilt-makers in a global context.

In contrast to the delicate and ornamental English, American and Italian quilts, Japanese quilting is distinguished by its sturdiness and utilitarianism. Through the mutual influence between Japan and the West that began in the 1970s, the Japanese needlework technique of *sashiko* became well known to global quilt makers and was frequently referred to in many manuals. According to *Textile Art of Japan*, Japanese *sashiko* needlework and its variation,

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<sup>48</sup> Nihon Vogue, *Sashiko: Traditional Japanese Quilt Designs*. (Tokyo: Japan Publications, 1989), p.31.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Shaw, *Quilts: A Living Tradition* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1995), p.156.

<sup>50</sup> Akio Kawamoto, *Beauty in Japanese Quilts* (Tokyo: Kokusai Art, 1990).

<sup>51</sup> Shaw, p.159.



*kogin*, are the key quilting techniques used to carry out Japanese quilting on cotton.<sup>52</sup> In another book focusing on *sashiko*, published in 1988, fabric artist Rosemary Muntus provides a brief introduction to *sashiko*:

*Sashiko* is created for garments made of one or more layers of indigo-dyed hemp or cotton fabric and quilted in various patterns for the purpose of mending, warmth or decoration. Originally, very simple running stitches were made in straight lines in order to reinforce areas of work garments, clothes, and rags that were apt to wear. Later, as the decorative element became increasingly important, the stitches became more elaborate, each region of Japan develops distinctive designs: *sashiko* stitching in Shonai (the west coast of Yamagata prefecture) and *San'in* (the Sea of Japan coasts of Kyoto, Hyogo, Tottori and Shimane prefectures); *Kogin* in Tsugaru (the western half of Aomori prefecture) and *Hishizashi* stitching in Nambu (north of Morioka, Iwate prefecture). Ainu of Hokkaido are noted for their *sashiko* in curvilinear designs.<sup>53</sup>

*Sashiko* can be translated literally as “little stab” or “little pierce”. As Muntus’s description makes clear, *sashiko* stitching was used on working clothes and household textiles. Running parallel to the warp and weft, it served to pack the fibres closer together and to make the fabric more impervious to wind and rain. The *sashiko* running stitch (straight quilting), sewn into an indigo-dyed fabric with white cotton thread, could create a variety of geometric patterns. Although there are other palette combinations of *sashiko* textiles, indigo and white are still the dominant colours. Traditional *sashiko* work is supposed to be reversible - the underside is also sewn with patterns.

Because *sashiko* implies the same meaning as “quilted”, British quilt historian Averil Colby refers to a Japanese *sashiko* firefighting coat in her writing about quilted jacket linings in men’s clothing in the nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup> Japanese fire-fighting jackets are made from

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<sup>52</sup> Sunny Yang and Rochelle M. Narasin, “Ainu Textiles: Applique and Embroidery”, in: *Textile Art of Japan* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Publishing, 1989), p.119.

<sup>53</sup> Rosemary Muntus, *Sashiko: a Japanese Sewing Technique*. (London: Rosemary & Thyme, 1988), p.5.

<sup>54</sup> Averil Colby, *Quilting* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1972), p.134-135.

several layers of closely quilted indigo cotton fabrics. The patterns are resist-dyed on the material, and usually indicated the ownership of the fire-fighting company and the name of the operator (Figure 11). These were displayed when the jacket was turned inside out after a fire had been extinguished, or during festival parades. The entire fire-fighting outfit normally consisted of a jacket and helmet, leg-protector pieces and gloves. The layered fabrics were stitched closely together with straight, parallel rows of traditional *sashiko* stitches, which gave an extremely durable quality to the fabric. The fire-fighting jackets would be doused with water before use. Fire-fighting teams would pull down timber buildings to create a fire break rather than quench the blaze with water, and *sashiko* gave some protection from falling tiles and timber.<sup>55</sup> The outfit shown in Figure 10 is from Tanaka Chūzaburō's collection in Amuse Museum, and the inclusion of Japanese fire-fighting jackets in texts such as Colby's has provided an important example for researchers seeking to identify an original form of Japanese quilting that existed before the American quilting trend started.



**Figure 11.** Fire-fighting Jacket, Japan.  
Collected by Amuse Museum (Tokyo)  
Photo by Leren Li

<sup>55</sup> Susan Briscoe, *The Ultimate Sashiko Source Book: Patterns, Projects and Inspirations*. (Exeter: David & Charles Publishing, 2004), p.10.

According to the related literature, *sashiko* originated in the northern part of Honshū Island in Japan as an essential technique to hold layers of cloth tightly in order to reinforce the indigo-dyed work clothes worn by farmers, fishermen, and their families.<sup>56</sup> *Sashiko* stitching is often mentioned in current discussions of *boro* as the basic technique used to make *boro* fabrics.<sup>57</sup> When *sashiko* is referred to in connection with *boro*, authors normally emphasise its practical value related to repair. While exploring *boro* in Aomori, a large number of *sashiko* pieces were found in the collection of Tanaka Chūzaburō, and many of the *sashiko* stitches are more elaborate than the simple running stitches made to hold the patches: this stitching is created with both functional and artistic considerations. Tanaka's collections mostly feature two *sashiko* techniques originating from Aomori: *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi*.



**Figure 12.** *Tsugaru kogin sashi*  
Tanaka Chūzaburō collection, Amuse Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li

<sup>56</sup> Yang and Narasin, p.119. Saikoh Takano, *Japanese Quilting: Sashiko* (London: Batsford, 2015), p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Katrina Rodabaugh and Karen Pearson, *Mending Matters: Stitch, Patch, and Repair Your Favourite Denim & More* (New York: Abrams, 2018), p.214.



**Figure 13.** *Nanbu hishi sashi*  
Tanaka Chūzaburō collection, Amuse Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li

Both *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* are formed with a grid closing stitch, a *sashiko* technique in which threads are stitched while counting the grid of the cloth texture and patterns are added cumulatively one by one. Tsugaru and Nanbu are two regions of Aomori prefecture: Tsugaru is a city to the south west of Aomori, and Nambu village is near the east coast. The two techniques are different in composition: as Figure 12 and Figure 13 show, the grid ratio (vertical: horizontal) of *Tsugaru kogin sashi* is 1:1, while the ratio of *Nanbu hishi sashi* is 1:2, but the basic methods are the same. Unlike *boro*, which retains warmth by adding fabrics, *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* achieve a better durability and heat retention through the reinforcing stitching. The essence of these two types of *sashiko* is to use precious threads as carefully as possible, and put the embroidery in the most important areas of the garments, especially the parts covering the upper body, to protect the wearer. They may not have been made for repair purposes, yet they serve as a testimony to hard times and people's creative strategies for survival.

*Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* have normally been discussed separately from *boro*: even in Amuse Museum they were not displayed alongside *boro*. But I include the examples of *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* in this research for the reason that they expand the current understandings, or typical forms, of both *sashiko* and *boro*. *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* are technically different from running stitch *sashiko*, which is used for stabilising patches or sewing the patterns according to guides in the manuals. However, *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* actually achieve both purposes simply through the use of needle and thread – they are embroidered patchwork with various patterns inside the diamond shaped “patches”. The basic running stitch used in Western quilt-making, as described earlier in this section, is almost identical to *sashiko* stitching. Moreover, the construction of traditional *sashiko* pieces also resembles the “sandwich” structure of Western quilts. The encounter with *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* has inspired this research to challenge existing ideas of *sashiko* and *boro*, and also the separate categories of “patchwork” “appliqué” and “quilting.”

As quilt designer Susan Briscoe suggests, traditional *sashiko* normally combines fabric in two or three layers, with the best-quality cloth on the top, and *sashiko* made today can have only one layer, or can include polyester or cotton quilt wadding.<sup>58</sup> Now that contemporary quilt makers have realised that *sashiko* textiles are basically a variation of quilted forms, the boundary between Western quilts and Japanese quilts has already started to blur. Working with Japanese-inspired techniques and designs has also explicitly transformed the work of Western quilt-makers. In 2017, Seattle-based quilt-maker Patricia Belyea published an instruction book based on her own quilt-making practices that combines elements from both Japanese and Western cultures, proposing an expanded understanding of “Japaneseness” in quilt-making. The universality of “patchwork–appliqué–quilting” textiles and their making techniques means

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<sup>58</sup> Susan Briscoe, *Japanese Quilt Blocks to Mix & Match*. (London: Quarto Books, 2008), p.11.

that we can see traditions being repeated, adapted, shifted across continents, shared and reimagined.

This section started with the quilt revival in America in the late twentieth century, and then moved to the American influence in Japan and re-exporting of Japanese quilts to the West. In the process, it revealed how the Japanese have reconstructed a “forgotten” tradition through nostalgic memories revived by foreign cultures. Moreover, the global interest in patchwork written into the Japanese experience also paved the way for the future acceptance of *boro*. In promoting Japanese quilts to the world, *sashiko* has been widely practised and readapted. Given the global celebration of *sashiko* and *boro*, examples of *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* have broadened the existing recognition of these crafts and provide an example of *sashiko* work that embraces “patchwork–appliqué–quilting”, and achieves this effect only by stitching.

### ***Mottainai* and The Cherished Scraps**

In recent writing and exhibitions, a predominant feature associated with *boro* is poverty, or the hardship and famine that existed in northern Japan. Is “poverty” the only motive that drives the recycling of fabrics in Japan? in the book *The Fabric of Life: Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan*, the co-author Kawasaki Kei writes, “There’s an old Japanese saying that you shouldn’t throw away any piece of cloth big enough to wrap three beans”.<sup>59</sup> Saving and repairing might have been a necessity rather than a choice during hard times, but these activities are not exclusive to Japan. This section argues that central to *boro*, and other repair activities in Japan, is pride, rather than poverty, that people’s concept of a “no waste” approach

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<sup>59</sup> Kei Kawasaki and Stephen Szczepanek, *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life – Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan* (Portland, OR: Portland Japanese Garden, 2015), p.4.

brings that tradition back today. In this section, the research will explore *mottainai* through *boro* and investigate the recent implications of this idea in exhibitions and fashion practices.

In Japanese, *mottainai* is a compound word made from 勿体 (*mottai*) and 無い (*nai*). 勿 and 体 literally mean “nothing”, and “*nai*” is a negation, so *mottainai* can be translated as “don’t waste” or “what a waste”. A standard etymological Japanese dictionary reveals that the linguistic origin of *mottainai* dates back to at least the thirteenth century, found in a collection of tales to suggest trouble, harm and impropriety.<sup>60</sup> As part of the Japanese cultural notion of *iki*, which emphasises unity with nature, the term “*mottainai*” has been applied to many disciplines, such as natural science, technology, psychology and other sustainability-related fields.<sup>61</sup> There are different explanations of *mottainai*, and many are based on religious concepts that urge people to appreciate everything that nature gives to human beings. In these explanations, one is based on the Shinto idea of the myriad of gods that resides in all elements of nature (*Yaoyorozu no Kami*), and the other is that all living things in nature are imbued with Buddhist spirits (*Sansen-souboku-kokudo-shhitu-kai-joubutsu*).<sup>62</sup> This research will not engage in detail with these concepts, or try to relate them to *boro*. Considering the close connection between *boro* and daily life, Sato Yuriko expresses her understanding of *mottainai* from a psychoanalytical perspective, writing:

“*Mottainai* means much more than wasteful, it expresses a sense of concern or regret for whatever is wasted, when its intrinsic value is not properly utilised. It is also used for the expenditure of time and effort or the sincere conduct and words of other people – anything which is valuable and precious – when they

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<sup>60</sup> Eiko Maruko Siniawer, “Affluence of the Heart”: Wastefulness and the Search for Meaning in Millennial Japan”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73: 1 (2014), p.165-86.

<sup>61</sup> Emile H Ishida and Ryuzo Furukawa, “The Japanese Industrial Revolution Which Did Not Part with Nature”, in: *Nature Technology: Creating a Fresh Approach to Technology and Lifestyle* (Tokyo: Springer, 2013), p.141. Yuriko Sato, “Mottainai: a Japanese Sense of Anima Mundi.” *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 62: 1 (2017), p.147-154.

<sup>62</sup> Ishida and Furukawa, p.144.

are wasted. For Japanese people, all these things have their natural endowments and an intrinsic value to their existence. In the world view within which ‘*Mottainai!*’ is uttered, there is no division between humans and nature, or between living beings and inanimate objects. There is a sense that not only humans but all beings in this world live together and strive to fulfil their lives.”<sup>63</sup>

Sato’s words evoke the notion of Shinto animism in *mottainai*, which is associated with the idea that everything in our physical universe has a spirit. This animist approach is used as a poetic expression in sustainability-related activities, including *boro* and other textile traditions that involve recycling. For example, Wada Yoshiko Iwamoto defines *boro* as worn-out fabrics that are then extensively repaired and sometimes used far beyond their “normal life cycle”.<sup>64</sup> In 2011, Fukagawa Bansho Gallery in Tokyo, a new gallery restored from an old printing shop, held its first show, *Mottainai*, featuring items from the *boro* collector Amy Katoh’s collection. As well as *boro* pieces, the exhibition also included other *mottainai* objects such as mended pots, a patched *washi zabuton* (sitting cushion filled with hand-made paper) and weavers’ swatch books (Figure 14).<sup>65</sup> In the same year, 2011, the Portland Japanese Garden held a *mottainai*-related exhibition as part of that year’s theme of “Living in Harmony with Nature”, entitled *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life*.

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<sup>63</sup> Yuriko Sato, “Mottainai: a Japanese sense of anima mundi.” *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 2017, 62, I, p.147.

<sup>64</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “*Boro no Bi: Beauty in Humility – Repaired Cotton Rags of Old Japan*”, in: *Proceedings, Textile Society of America Symposium 2004*, p.458, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004), available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/458/>

<sup>65</sup> Amy Katoh, “Mottainai Exhibition The Sumida River”, *Blue and White Tokyo*, October 28, 2011, available at: <https://blueandwhitetokyo.com/2011/10/28/mottainai-exhibition-the-sumida-river/> [Accessed 30 March 2020]





**Figure 14.** *Mottainai* exhibition at Fukagawa Bansho Gallery, 2011.  
Photo courtesy of Blue and White Tokyo.

The two exhibitions held in Portland and Tokyo did not emphasise *boro*'s association with poverty, but paid more attention to the spiritual values embodied by *boro* that can still influence people today. In my interview with Amy Sylvester Katoh, she described the exhibition as a “show of the neighbourhood”.<sup>66</sup> The gallery space was renovated by two architects, owners of the gallery, who had moved to the Fukugawa neighbourhood, and some of the displayed objects were hand-made by local residents living nearby: people who either knew each other before the exhibition, or became friends because of the exhibition. “It’s about connecting people in my neighbourhood,” as Katoh put it.<sup>67</sup> No matter how small scale the exhibition was, it conveyed the idea of *mottainai* through things that were more than just fabrics, and that also included space, people, and even the relationships we build with the world. When *boro* is examined through the lens of spiritual ideas like *mottainai*, the focus on its humbleness turns to a broader discussion about the preciousness of things and the awe of nature.

<sup>66</sup> Amy Sylvester Katoh. Interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Tokyo, Japan, 4 December, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

“Living in Harmony with Nature” was the theme suggested by the Portland Japanese Garden’s art exhibition series and their *mottainai* exhibition was organised with the aim of raising environmental consciousness by highlighting “the Japanese approaches to the natural environment”.<sup>68</sup> Textiles in this exhibition were borrowed from two Japanese textile experts who are also *boro* collectors, Kawasaki Kei, of Gallery Kei in Kyoto, and Stephen Szczepanek, of Sri in Brooklyn. To demonstrate the resourcefulness of textile makers, the exhibition covered a wide range of natural fibres that had been recycled to make new fabrics. The objects were separated into two groups: textiles made from cotton and those made from bast fibres used before the advent of cotton, such as fibres from elm, linden, wisteria, ramie, hemp, banana, mulberry and paper (Figure 15). The cotton-made garments mainly consisted of *sashiko*, *boro* and *sakiori* textiles (Figure 16). In terms of the recycling culture in Japan, specifically textile recycling, Stephen Szczepanek argued that it was a constant process, and poverty was its driving force; he wrote:

Bales of cotton scraps from western Japan were divided and sold at each port in eastern Japan. These cotton rags were a luxury for the local rural residents as cotton provided warmth – an alien comfort for those who knew only the basic protection against the elements afforded by woven bast.

Cotton clothing and bedding were fashioned from rags using two basic methods:

The first is by using *sashiko*, a running stitch, to join scraps together in order to create a large area of cloth, and then eventually layering the cloth for added durability and warmth. The result is a kind of haphazard patchwork of indigo dyed cottons, what is now referred to as *boro*, which means ‘ragged’.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Diane Durston, “Art in the Garden”, in Kawasaki and Szczepanek, p.2.

<sup>69</sup> Kawasaki and Szczepanek, p.35.

From the text, poverty is still cited as the historical background to the repair tradition in Japan, and the purposeful hoarding of cloth is the chief reason that these *boro* textiles can be seen today, generations after they were made. However, Szczepanek also implies that *boro* is not like *sashiko* and *sakiori* – it is a relatively recent concept, recognised as such long after the textiles were created. In this exhibition, the curators thought about *boro* anew, beyond its material level understanding. They redefined the concept from the repaired textile “*boro*” to an abstract idea “*Boro*” which accommodates more aesthetic and spiritual interpretations. As sustainable lifestyles and textile production methods have come full circle in contemporary material culture, the conceptual “*Boro*”, similar to *mottainai*, has become part of the “Japanese essence” that teaches a lesson in ecology about living in harmony with nature. The following paragraphs will introduce the global promotion of *mottainai*, which celebrates values of “reducing, reusing and recycling”. Built on the shared values, placing the theme of *mottainai* at the centre of the exhibition emphasised the spiritual aspect of *boro*, evoked a sense of awe and gratitude, and also added the nuanced notion of “respect” to the existing readings of *mottainai* and Japanese repair culture.



**Figure 15.** *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life* at Portland Japanese Garden, 2011.  
Photo courtesy of Jonathan Ley



**Figure 16.** *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life* at Portland Japanese Garden, 2011.

Photo courtesy of Bill Volckening

<http://willywonkyquilts.blogspot.com/2011/11/mottainai-fabric-of-life.html>

Before the exhibition in Portland was held, the concept of *mottainai* had already been identified by Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai after a visit to Japan, and spread internationally since 2005.<sup>70</sup> Professor Maathai brought the idea to her Green Belt Movement in Kenya, focusing on the shared meanings embedded in Kenyan and Japanese cultural and spiritual values to solve the problem of plastic pollution.<sup>71</sup> Maathai also quoted the term in the end of her speech at the 2006 launch of the United Nations Human Rights Council , saying:

Recently while visiting Japan, I learnt of the concept of *mottainai*, which not only calls for the practising of the ‘Reduce-Reuse-Recycle’ but also teaches us to be grateful, to not waste and be appreciative of the limited resources. This old Buddhist teaching is in complete agreement with the concept of sustainable

<sup>70</sup> Selena Hoy, “Mottainai: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle—and Respect”, *Highlighting Japan*  
<https://www.gov-online.go.jp/pdf/hlj/20180701/28-29.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> Eddah Mutua and Kikuko Omori, "A Cross-Cultural Approach to Environmental and Peace Work: Wangari Maathai's Use of Mottainai in Kenya", *The Journal of Social Encounters*, 2: 1, p.22-36, available at:  
[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol2/iss1/3/](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol2/iss1/3/)

management of resources. Indeed, I was very impressed to learn that using technology, many new items were being made from recycled materials like plastic waste, from which companies could make beautiful *furoshiki* (wrapping cloth).<sup>72</sup>

According to Karryn Miller's article published in *Japan Today*, after Maathai's visit to Japan and the global spread of this concept the Mottainai Campaign, a Tokyo-based NGO, was established.<sup>73</sup> With different keywords every year, the Mottainai Campaign has run a number of events to engage the public with environmental conservation practices. As Selena Hoy notes, the concept of *mottainai* originated in Japan, but its resurgence in Japan owes a great debt to Wangari Maathai.<sup>74</sup> From long-lost traditions that are discovered by other cultures and re-celebrated in Japan, this cultural mix is manifested in the refashioning processes of both *mottainai* and *boro*. Similar to the debates on the appropriation of *boro* in Western fashion, some scholars also argue about whether Maathai's use of *mottainai* is another example of cultural appropriation.<sup>75</sup> As Kinefuchi Etsuko suggests, it might allow readers to "set aside the dominant assumption and discourse of cultural appropriation as an oppressive act or power struggle and see how it is possible to rearticulate and use it to create a more hopeful, compassionate, and just world."<sup>76</sup>

The exhibition in Portland and its publication influenced later exhibitions in using *mottainai* and a similar descriptive tone to analyse *boro* under the Japanese aesthetic context. However, the idea of *mottainai* mainly reveals the material aspect of *boro* related to

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<sup>72</sup> Wangari Maathai, "Protect Human Rights, Protect Planet Rights", a statement by Wangari Maathai at the launch of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 19 June 2006. Geneva, Switzerland. Geneva: United Nations, 2006, available at:

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session1/wangari\\_maathai.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session1/wangari_maathai.pdf)

<sup>73</sup> Karryn Miller, "Campaign Enjoying New Relevance", *Japan Today*, March 15, 2009, available at: <https://japantoday.com/category/features/lifestyle/mottainai-campaign-enjoying-new-relevance>

<sup>74</sup> Hoy.

<sup>75</sup> Etsuko Kinefuchi, "Wangari Maathai and *Mottainai*: Gifting 'Cultural Appropriation' with Cultural Empowerment", in: Eddah M Mutua, Alberto González, and Anke Thorey Wolbert (eds.), *The Rhetorical Legacy of Wangari Maathai: Planting the Future* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), p.137-156.

<sup>76</sup> Kinefuchi, p.142.

sustainability. And other readings of Japanese aesthetics, such as *mingei*, although not often used in current writing on *boro*, might offer more nuanced understandings about *boro*. For example, in the criterion of beauty constructed by Yanagi Sōetsu in *mingei* theory, he emphasised the beauty of handcrafts, intimacy, function, irregularity, naturalness and selflessness that all apply to the characteristics of *boro*.<sup>77</sup> And these aspects of beauty lead people to think about the unknown *boro* makers, the womanhood, the intentions of making, under different natural and social environments, as these are all essential factors that create and give values to *boro*.

Artistic and philosophical ideas like *mingei* theory might provide the audience with a more comprehensive picture of *boro*, however, the substantial theoretical system of Japanese aesthetics could also be a challenge for the foreign audience to digest immediately. In this case, a relatively straightforward concept like *mottainai*, which has been discovered and gradually accepted internationally, serves better as an introductory concept focusing on a specific point. By invoking concepts of *mottanai*, it has therefore been argued that Japanese recycling culture is rooted not only in stories of poverty, but also in an inherent dignity in things, the soul of matter, of making do, of not wasting. *Mottainai* creates more space for the re-articulation of *boro*. To illustrate this point, the next section will provide examples of creative “*boro*” that elaborate the word with more possibilities.

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<sup>77</sup> Yuko Kikuchi, “Appropriation of Orientalism,” in *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p.53.

## **Boro: The Textile with Creative Possibilities**

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari describe patchwork as a space made up of a set of vicinities: “each vicinity is like a shred of Euclidean space, but the linkage between one vicinity and the next is not defined and can be effected in an infinite number of ways.”<sup>78</sup> A patchwork is like “a rhizome [that] has no beginning or end, it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, inter-mezzo.”<sup>79</sup> As a transculturally defined term, *boro* displays a rhizomatic nature that continues to engender new ideas and relationships out of materials and forms gathered from different origins. This research situates *boro* within the contexts of cross-cultural borrowing and sharing: primary sources are interconnected in some way but articulate *boro* from different angles. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, the metaphor of the rhizome has infinite potential based on “alliance, uniquely alliance,” rather than the tree system, that is based on filiation.<sup>80</sup> This section will challenge the frameworks of “*boro*” that were discussed earlier in this chapter, seeing the term as something other than a vintage Japanese patchwork with no traditional or spiritual values, and questioning what *boro* can be.

During my second visit to Japan, in December 2018, I visited Okuno Ryuichi, a vintage textile dealer, in his studio and home in a remote mountain village in Chiba prefecture, about an hour’s drive from Tokyo with no public transportation. Okuno built his OLD INDUSTRIAL JAPAN studio in 2015, selling handmade bags made from the vintage *boro* fabrics he had collected from rural families. He also uses the studio space as a gallery to display the vintage clothes in his collection: customers can view these by appointment (Figure 17).

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<sup>78</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.564.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 17.** OLD INDUSTRIAL JAPAN studio  
Photograph by Leren Li

My original intention in this interview was to know more about Okuno's experiences of *boro* collecting and re-creation. But when Okuno introduced his home, the Edo-period cottage that he and his wife bought when they moved from Tokyo to this village in 2017, his words brought a new layer of meaning to *boro*.



**Figure 18.** Outside View of OLD INDUSTRIAL JAPAN studio  
Photograph by Leren Li



“My thatched roof is also a *boro* project”: Okuno told me that he had been working on fixing the thatched roof since they moved in (Figure 18).<sup>81</sup> Instead of buying a ready-made straw roof, he decided to do it himself. From growing and cutting to bundling and thatching skills, everything was learnt from scratch. Some knowledge was derived from the internet, and he also asked elders in his family for suggestions. Okuno’s family has been running a welfare service corporation 空と海 (Atelier Sky and Sea) for more than twenty years.<sup>82</sup> This corporation helps people with disabilities to learn craft skills and sell their work. Okuno often works there and teaches weaving and sewing skills. In the conversation with him, I could feel the connection between him and the land. Okuno explained that he didn’t fix the roof because it was broken, or for any other urgent reason: it was purely because he hoped to gradually make this cottage that was over two hundred years old look better.<sup>83</sup> This *boro* thatched roof is made to do something new, but at the same time preserves the original, and the gradual process also creates a narrative that is caught between the past and a new becoming.

“Becoming produces nothing other than itself”: Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* propose a life force which does not involve becoming for some preconceived end, but becoming for the sake of change itself.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, *boro* is also a textile about becoming. Patches can be arranged in an infinite number of ways, and the patchwork maker is free to finish or restart patching at any point because patchwork can be centre-less and border-less. In the case of Okuno, if, as he suggested, the roof is a piece of *boro*, then the patches are the straw. In the making process of *boro*, no matter in which form and using which materials, there is never a finished *boro*. *Boro* grows by endlessly decaying, combining and reconstructing. From time to time, things will break and decay. Nature brings brokenness not only to what we wear, but also to the environment we live in. Okuno’s *boro* rooftop is a reminder of how *boro* can be

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<sup>81</sup> Ryuichi Okuno, interviewed by Leren Li. 11 December 2018.

<sup>82</sup> “Atelier Sky and Sea”, *Jizokai*, available at: <https://www.jizokai.com/>

<sup>83</sup> Ryuichi Okuno, interviewed by Leren Li. 11 December 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p.277.

thought of far beyond the level of household textiles. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “becoming is involutionary, and involution is creative”.<sup>85</sup> Okuno’s *boro* roof project is still ongoing, and he sometimes records the work in progress and posts pictures on OLD INDUSTRIAL JAPAN’s Instagram account. Figure 19 shows the latest update on Okuno’s re-thatching of the roof during the Covid-19 pandemic: on the thatched roof is a *boro* jacket hand-made by him. The mended rooftop and patched fabric are material examples that confirm the specificity of Japanese traditional mending cultures, and also their continuity.



**Figure 19.** Re-thatched roof with self-made *boro* jacket by Okuno Ryuichi.  
Photograph, Instagram @oldindustrial

In front of Okuno’s house is a horizontal bamboo stick hanging down from the roof as a drying rack (Figure 20). Each time the Okunos get back from a textile collecting trip, the couple will wash the fabrics and dry them naturally in the air and sunshine, and then making the scraps into bags, scarves and jackets. Other *boro*-inspired artisans and their work will be discussed in Chapter Four. What differs in Okuno’s case is that beyond the textile dimension

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.278.

he interprets *boro* and practises *boro* through a gradual process that intertwines the relationship between people and the land.



**Figure 20.** A piece of *boro* collected by Okuno Ryuichi  
Photograph by Leren Li

Returning to the earlier linguistic analysis of *boro*, I quoted archaeologist Richard Hodges' definition of *boro* in his essay "Boro Boro: Cruel and Unusual Treatment of Fabrics", published by NUNO in the book *Boro Boro*. In the late 1990s, the design director of NUNO, Sudo Reiko, created a series of illustrated books describing the company's textile creations, organised around six themes: *Fuwa Fuwa* (fluffy, flimsy), *Zawa Zawa* (noisy, agitated), *Kira Kira* (glittering, shiny) *Suke Suke* (sheer, transparent) and *Boro Boro* (ragged, fragile). These titles referred to the tactile qualities of the fabric as well as the emotional response they induce. To introduce the textile innovations, Sudo Kazuyoshi provided a new definition of *boro* as "a cruel and unusual treatment of fabrics".<sup>86</sup> The book shows fabrics being roasted over burners, dissolved with acid, boiled and stewed, ripped with blades and pulled apart. Time is an essential

<sup>86</sup> Kazuyoshi Sudo and Alfred Birbaum, *Boro Boro*. (Tokyo: NUNO Corporation, 1997), p.15.

element which shapes and fades *boro*. However, manufacturers are not able to wait, they have to compress time and create the decay from scratch. The book states that the intention of creating these *boro boro* fabrics is to emulate “the subtle beauty of things falling apart with age”.<sup>87</sup>

Figure 21 shows a NUNO fabric sample of 剥落布, *agitfab* (plastic lamination), held in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s collection. This piece consists of woven and laminated polyester and plastic, polyurethane and newspaper. According to Sudo and Birnbaum, in Japan the plastic laminates that are typically used for sealing and protecting documents such as ID cards are known as “pouches”. NUNO used a laminating technique to create this fabric with scraps of old newspaper scattered over a polyester organdie, portions of which were then heat-sealed into polyurethane “pouches”. When the fabric is washed, only the “pouched” areas remain as legible design elements.<sup>88</sup>



**Figure 21.** 剥落布, *agitfab*, plastic lamination. NUNO. Date: 1997  
Place of Origin: Japan  
Collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p.17.

Okuno's thatched roof expands my imagination of the materials that create *boro*, while the textile sample from NUNO, along with the text from the *Boro Boro* book, makes me rethink *boro* as an intervention into materials. Instead of patching with one type of material, the *agitfab* swatch represents an assemblage of natural fibres and synthetic fibres. *Boro* in this sense is about breaking the boundaries, creating new connections through a dynamic process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

The other example by NUNO is a piece of *Tsugihagi kibiso* (figure 22). In Japanese, *Tsugihagi*, as the previous section mentioned, means the work of patching and darning. *Kibiso* is the tough outermost skin of the silk cocoon. This piece is from Sudo Reiko's *kibiso* project that she initiated in 2008, working with silk industry waste and collaborating with artisans from the city of Tsuruoka, located in a former silk production centre in Yamagata prefecture.<sup>89</sup> According to Sudo, *kibiso* is a by-product of raw silk reeling and is normally used as an ingredient for cosmetics, or animal feed.<sup>90</sup> Although *kibiso* is raw and rough, it was not considered as waste in the era of hand spinning. "Only with the advent of mechanised weaving did it become a by-product, waste, at the spinning mills", as Sudo explains.<sup>91</sup> To recycle this mechanically produced waste, NUNO designers developed it into a line of high-end textiles, and included it into the company's *Tsugihagi* collection, a series of textiles made from scraps of fabric leftovers.<sup>92</sup> In 2016, this collection was shown in the exhibition *Scraps: Fashion, Textiles, and Creative Reuse* at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

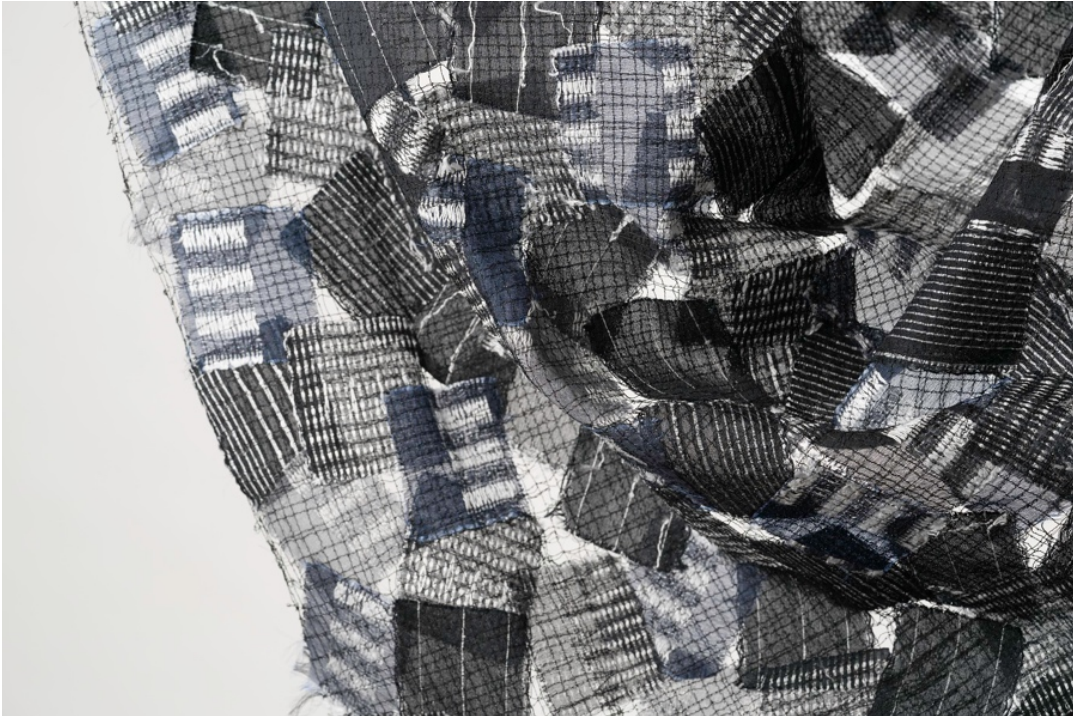
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<sup>89</sup> Reiko Sudo, "Lost and Found", In *Scraps: Fashion, Textiles, and Creative Reuse* (New York: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, 2016), p.38.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.



**Figure 22.** *Tsugihagi kibiso*

Designer: Reiko Sudo

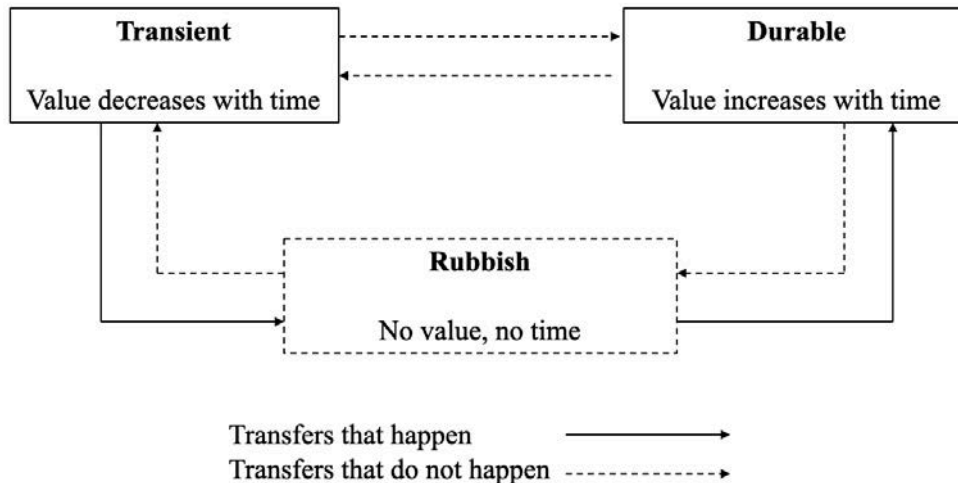
Source: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

Copyright: Susan McNab & NUNO Corporation

From Sudo's statement, there is a value shift in *kibiso* in this example. Its value decreases as mechanical spinning is adopted in production, but once it is recreated into *tsugihagi kibiso*, its sustainable meaning and unique texture brings value back, even increasing it. This value transition corresponds to the basic Rubbish Theory hypothesis proposed by Michael Thompson (Figure 23). Objects that can be possessed, in Thompson's Rubbish Theory, are recognised in either of two value categories: the Transient and the Durable. The Transient value will decrease to zero with time, and the Durable value will increase to infinity. Thompson argues that there is a third, covert category: Rubbish. Because Rubbish has no value, it is invisible to socio-economic theory. However, it provides a channel of value transition between Transience and Durability.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Michael Thompson. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p.59.

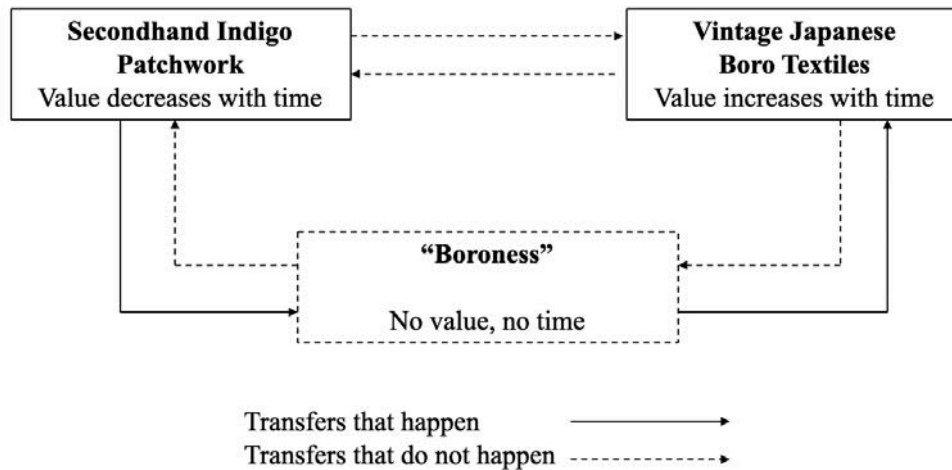


**Figure 23.** Basic Rubbish Theory Hypothesis.

In: Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*

Thompson uses the diagram in Figure 23 to analyse the progress of the gentrification phenomenon that has transformed rat-infested slums in London into desirable heritage. *Kibiso* was in the Transient category, so it will gradually lose its value due to natural decay or being devalued by machine spinning. Meanwhile, *tsugihagi kibiso* is considered Durable, especially due to its increasing artistic and design value that accrues from being collected and exhibited by museums.<sup>94</sup> And the process of reconstructing *kibiso*, from separating and winding to spinning and sewing it into a new fabric in NUNO's *tsugihagi* collection, reveals how value transfers. Thompson's theory also provides a structure that supports an understanding of the resurgence of *boro*. As the diagram below shows, the transformation from being discarded cotton scraps (Transient) to becoming collectable antiques and a cultural symbol (Durable) is like a process of constructing a conceptual "*boro*".

<sup>94</sup> Textile, *Tsugihagi kibiso*, collected by Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Collection, *Cooper Hewitt*, available at: <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/420556841/> [Accessed 11 April 2020]  
*Kibiso* fibres collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum, Collections, *V&A Museum*, available at: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1434148/silk-fiber/> [Accessed 11 April 2020]



**Figure 24.** Analysis of *Boro* through Michael Thompson's Rubbish Theory

This thesis is built on the premise that patchwork with a repair purpose is a universal practice that is not exclusive to Japan. And the patchwork discussed here is for domestic use rather than being created for decoration or artistic display. In this case, second-hand patchwork is a visual representation revealing the decreasing value of clothes: the more distressed the garment is, the more patches it has. On the contrary, in the case of vintage Japanese patchwork *boro*, patches make it more “authentic” and “valuable”. In Chapter Three I will further discuss various evaluations of *boro* from the points of view of different agencies. The fundamental objective of the research is to investigate the “rubbish”, which is the “*boro*-ness”, based on Thompson's theoretical structure. This “*boro*-ness” transforms the objects into a conceptual “*boro*”, which creates meanings and values to enable the Transient to become Durable. As this thesis argues, *boro* is a patchwork made by Japanese hands, but is conceptually defined through cross-cultural exchange. Understanding *boro* as an intervention of materials is an approach by which to identify the social and cultural forces behind “*boro*-ness”.



## Conclusion

Chapter One begins with a question about what *boro* is, or can be, and throughout this chapter my research has attempted to extend and explore the boundaries of various definitions of *boro* and examine the meanings surrounding “*boro*-ness”, rather than the physical object. To investigate the potential of *boro*, this chapter positions *boro* within a transcultural context by discussing its correlations with patchwork-making techniques and mending traditions in a Western context. The universality of patchwork culture and its long-established history drives this research to challenge the exclusivity of *boro* and further explore its creative possibilities.

As a type of patchwork, *boro* also performs the functions of mending, decoration and storytelling. This research uses examples to show that Japanese patchwork shares some structural similarities with Western quilting and appliqué techniques. The connection between patchwork and poverty is commonly seen in Western cultures too, but the physical pieces have been well documented, so that this patchwork culture has continued with sufficient historical references. Although *boro* followed a very different trajectory from that of Western patchwork, the cultural exchange between Japanese patchwork and that of other national contexts paved the way for the recent resurgence of *boro*.

As *boro* has become a symbolic image of “Japanese patchwork”, this chapter investigates the changing narrative of Japanese patchwork, from *kesa* and *yosejire* to the use of the term “Japanese patchwork” in Western texts. By exploring a range of understandings of “Japanese patchwork”, this research demonstrates the resourcefulness of the patchwork tradition within Japan, which cannot be oversimplified by the recent celebration of *boro*.

To provide a historical reference that resembles the development of *boro*, I used the example of the rebirth of Japanese quilting activity in the 1970s with the influence of American quilt culture. The Western acknowledgement of quilting history prompted Japanese quilt makers’ cultural memories of their own handcraft tradition. After a process of learning and

reinvention, Japanese quilting was re-exported to the world, along with its distinctive *sashiko* technique. This “renaissance” in Japanese quilting applies to the current reconstruction of *boro*; moreover, this research suggests that the global interest in patchwork written into the Japanese experience also laid the ground for the future acceptance of *boro*.

In the process of creating meaning for *boro*, its spiritual value is an important factor that differentiates it from patchwork in other cultures. Focusing on two exhibitions held in Portland and Tokyo that embraced the theme of *mottainai*, this research argues that the essence of *boro* is an awe of nature: respect, rather than poverty. And the global promotion of the *mottainai* spirit took a similar route to that of Japanese quilts and *boro*. In this chapter I use Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory to further discuss this process of value creation.

In the final section of this chapter, I further open up the discussion of *boro* to explain how *boro* embraces the rhizomatic nature proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. I use a thatched roof mending project to expand the understanding of *boro* on a material level, and the case of NUNO exemplifies a new way of interpreting the action of “doing *boro*” as not just repair work, but also as an intervention *into* materials.

Chapter One initiates a transcultural conversation relating to the argument that *boro* is “made in Japan but defined by others”. However, this argument does not deny the Japanese interpretations of *boro*, and in the next chapter I will use a case study of the display of a collection of *boro* at Tokyo’s Amuse Museum to identify ways in which the meaning and value of *boro* is constructed within a Japanese context.

## Chapter Two

### The Impulse to Repair: Investigating the Construction of *Boro* in Japan

#### Introduction

I still remember an interview that I conducted with a vintage kimono seller at the Ueno flea market when I was doing fieldwork in Tokyo in 2018. When I began with a question about Japanese *boro*, he interrupted me before I had finished the question, correcting my use of “Japanese *boro*”. “If we say this is Japanese *boro*, then people will think there are *boro* in other countries too, but *boro* is exclusive to Japan, there’s no need to repeat its origin and mislead people,” he explained. This answer surprised me and made me reconsider *boro* as not simply a material object, but as a cultural phenomenon that has been constructed transnationally. Before moving on to explore global material flows of *boro* in Chapters Three and Four, this chapter will focus on constructions of *boro* in Japanese contexts in which *boro* has been seen primarily as an ethnographic object that records the makers’ and wearers’ everyday lives. This chapter will draw attention to the material perspective and the affects *boro* expresses in relation to Japanese social and cultural histories and sensibilities. A thread throughout this chapter is the *boro* collection of Japanese folklorist Tanaka Chūzaburō, shown at Amuse Museum between 2007 and 2018.

I visited Amuse Museum twice in 2017 and 2018, and between the two visits I also went to the city of Aomori in 2018, trying to find out how *boro* was constructed or interpreted in its “birthplace.” In the first section I will describe the research trip, from Tokyo to Aomori and back to Tokyo, along with the change in my reflection on *boro*. When I visited Amuse Museum in 2017, my knowledge of *boro* was quite limited. The second section provides an analysis of the Amuse Museum exhibition to summarise the key messages that the museum tried to communicate: human care and common humanity, the appreciation of owned resources and the design thinking in *boro*, which is still inspiring today. This section will also investigate

the methods of display and interpretation that the exhibition used to construct the stories about *boro*.

After seeing the exhibition, I was focused on the idea of *boro* as a craft originating in the far north of Japan, in Aomori. I later questioned this idea through the further interviews and observations I carried out in the following year. I started to ask whether *boro* was a specific technique and tradition passed down through generations, or a phenomenon that is being created in the twenty-first century as another cultural symbol of Japan? In the third section I will discuss my findings in the Aomori Prefectural Museum and the Aomori Museum of History. This section will also investigate the textile recycling and repairing tradition in relation to the natural environment, as well as the history of the cotton manufacturing industry in Japan. In the final section, this research will re-examine the presentation of *boro* at Amuse Museum through another special exhibition of *bodoko*, to discuss how the museum used *boro* as a cultural symbol to construct Japanese ethnicity.

In light of the above, this chapter has three objectives: to examine the exhibition of Tanaka Chūzaburō's *boro* collection in Tokyo Amuse Museum in terms of the thematic claims it tried to make and the curatorial practices adopted to support the theme; to trace the records of "*boro*" in its so-called "birthplace", Aomori, and to expand the knowledge related to the creation of *boro*; and to re-evaluate the concept of "*boro*" shaped by museums in the construction of a Japanese identity in the twenty-first century.

### **From Tokyo to Aomori: An Inverted Exploration of the Origin**

I first encountered *boro* in the summer of 2015, during a lunch break at the Kinokuniya Bookstore in New York City, where I picked up an illustrated book, *Boro: Rags and Tatters*

*from the Far North of Japan.*<sup>1</sup> I immediately fell in love with these beautifully battered indigo scraps, and the poetic stories sewn into them. The book suggested that this type of textile originated in the Aomori prefecture in northern Japan. One year later, beginning my PhD research, I discovered that Amuse Museum in Tokyo had been presenting an exhibition of *boro* since 2007, and most of the pieces that I had seen in the *Boro* book were on display in Amuse Museum. I therefore planned a field trip from Tokyo to Aomori, to compare what I was reading in the books on *boro* with what I might find on my way to its “birthplace”.



**Figure 1.** Amuse Museum.  
Photograph courtesy of Amuse Museum

Amuse Museum (Figure 1) is located in Asakusa, a district on the north-east fringes of central Tokyo. Asakusa is the centre of Tokyo’s *shitamashi* (“downtown” – this literally translates as “low city”), which was once filled with gangsters, geisha, courtesans, writers, artists and beggars. Now it remains a major sightseeing place for locals and tourists, and is best

<sup>1</sup> Yukiko Koide and Kyōichi Tsuzuki, *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan* (Tokyo: ASPECT Corp., 2009). [unpaginated]

known for its Buddhist temple, Sensō-Ji. Amuse Museum is privately owned by Amuse Edutainment Inc., and when the company bought the building it had been there for over forty years. The limited space and low ceiling height made this property a far from ideal place for a cinema or a venue for musical performances. The company therefore decided to set up a museum in this building, marketing it as a “live museum” of art where people could feel and experience “real” Japanese textile culture and Edo period *ukiyo-e* through many functioning spaces such as an *ukiyo-e* theatre and performance space, as well as the exhibition galleries. On the second floor there is a permanent exhibition of *boro*, and the third floor is designed for temporary exhibitions focusing on various aspects of *boro*. In 2017, there was an exhibition entitled *Boro the Shining Boro – Bodoko, the Life Cloth*, which mainly featured the *boro* sheets that women used to lie on to give birth. The exhibition in 2018 was devoted to photography as a medium to record *boro* and people’s lives in Aomori. Due to the museum’s relocation, the exhibitions were closed in March 2019 and scheduled for travelling shows in Australia, China, and New York. In 2021, the museum will be moved to a new space away from Tokyo.

The permanent exhibition (Figure 2) that takes up most of the museum space shows the collection of Tanaka Chūzaburō, the Aomori-born folklorist and ethnologist who spent more than 40 years seeking out folk crafts in northern Japan. This collection includes not only *boro*, but also antique folk tools and costumes from Tanaka’s collection that were borrowed by Japanese movie director Kurosawa Akira for his film *Dream* (1990). Due to the limited space, around 100 pieces of *boro* clothing and accessories are displayed in the museum, and the rest of Tanaka’s collection, estimated at more than 30,000 pieces, is currently kept in a warehouse in Aomori, managed by the collector’s son after his death in 2013.



**Figure 2.** *Boro* exhibition at Amuse Museum.  
Photograph by Leren Li

The history of *boro* told by Tanaka’s collection has a close connection with the Tōhoku region, where the collector’s native town, Aomori, is located. Tanaka’s collection, as showcased in Koide and Tsuzuki’s book, also inspired my research project. As the subtitle of the book, *Rags and Tatters from The Far North of Japan*, suggests, *boro* is considered to be a creation of the Tōhoku region. As Tsuzuki wrote in his introduction, Aomori was home to extremely poor farmers who, out of desperate necessity, created an astonishing textile aesthetic out of *boro* – mere “rags”.<sup>2</sup> However, this assertion is arguable according to two facts that I observed during my fieldwork. Firstly, through interviews with different vintage textile dealers, I identified that most of their *boro* textiles were sourced a surprisingly long way from northern Japan. Distributed around the small villages around the country, *boro* is collected from suburban areas around Niigata, Aichi and Biwa lake. Secondly, there are barely any historical records about so-called “*boro*” to be found in the Aomori Prefectural Museum. When I visited

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the museum in December 2018, groups of local textile crafts from different periods and areas were on display, including *sakiori*, examples of the geometric needlework styles *Tsugaru kogin-sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi*, and some heavily mended garments. But the term “*boro*” was missing throughout the exhibitions I visited. So why, when *boro* has gained worldwide acknowledgement, is it keeping so quiet in its “birthplace”? How has Tanaka Chūzaburō and his collection shown at Amuse Museum influenced the transcultural interpretations of *boro*? To answer this question, it is important to know more about Tanaka’s background and his approach to collecting, and also to investigate further into the geography, history and cultural context of Aomori.

Tanaka Chūzaburō was born in 1933 in Kawanai, a small town in Aomori prefecture.<sup>3</sup> He received no professional training in archaeology or anthropology. According to Koide and Tsuzuki, after World War II Tanaka moved with his family to Hirosaki City, where he went to high school. It was then that Tanaka became fascinated by archaeology.<sup>4</sup> At the age of 24, he left his shop clerk job in order to survey ancient sites before they were destroyed by the clearing of farmland and building of roads. After 10 years of digging, he became Cultural Property officer for the Hiranai Board of Education; he then worked at the Ogawara Ethnology Museum, whereupon his interest shifted to ethnography and folk tools. It has generally been thought that the ancient Japanese living in the north wore animal skins, but Tanaka believed that there must have been other creative clothing options.<sup>5</sup> From around 1965 he embarked on his new fieldwork to collect oral lore from elders about the history of clothing in Aomori. After spending more than forty years collecting folk items, Tanaka had amassed an enormous number of items related to food, clothing and shelter, and other detailed material evidence recording the life of people in Aomori. Apart from the private collection kept by his family, Amuse

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



Museum and the Aomori Prefectural Museum are the two major institutions that hold Tanaka's collections. The next section will provide an analysis of the *boro* narratives in Amuse Museum, and then the research will move to the findings in Aomori.

### **An Analysis of the Amuse Museum's *Boro* Exhibition**

*Boro: Tanaka Chuzaburo Collection* was located on the second floor of the museum. Visitors entering the museum would arrive at the museum shop on the first floor. Here, visitors could find Tanaka's memoir of his collecting life and books about *sashiko* stitching, including both *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi*, that originated in Aomori. The only book directly referring to the term "*boro*" was Tsuzuki and Koide's *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan*. There were also some exhibition souvenirs, such as scarves and T-shirts with indigo patchwork prints (Figures 3 and 4).



**Figure 3 (left).** Nylon scarf with *boro* print, Amuse Museum.



**Figure 4 (right).** *Boro* T-shirt, Amuse Museum.

The permanent exhibition was mostly object based. Most of the narration presented in the exhibition was on general text panels for each section, with smaller text labels next to the objects. The information is mostly quoted from Tanaka's book or is directly from him. There was no catalogue to introduce the details of each piece, but the items in the exhibition correlated with those documented in Tsuzuki and Koide's book. The authors referred to Tanaka

Chūzaburō in the book but didn't mention the museum. Together, the materials above conveyed the cultural meanings of *boro* in Amuse Museum. In this section, layers of information, from the exhibition text panels to the words of the museum's guide and the book by Tsuzuki and Koide, will be examined.



**Figure 5.** *Boro: Real Astonishment.*  
Amuse Museum 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Exhibition.  
Photograph, Tsuzuki Kyōichi

There were no advertising posters for the exhibition of Tanaka's collection. The poster shown in Figure 5 was designed for a separate photography exhibition about *boro*, although the photos were displayed in the same space as Tanaka's collection. The pictures were taken by Tsuzuki Kyōichi, co-author of *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan*, and the display of this photo collection was held as a celebration of the museum's tenth anniversary.<sup>6</sup> Tsuzuki invited three people, playing the roles of a couple with a daughter, to

<sup>6</sup> *Boro: Real Astonishment.* Amuse Museum 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Exhibition. *Amuse Museum*, available at: <http://amusemuseum.com/english/exhibition/index.html> [Accessed 3 Feb 2020]

take part in a photoshoot in Aomori during the snowy season. The permanent exhibition did not include image records or any other written documents about the development of *boro* in Aomori. Although Tsuzuki's photos added no factual information for the audience about the history of *boro* from an archaeological perspective, these artistically stylised images contributed to the construction of the *boro* story that the museum tries to tell.

### Human Care as a Key Message

The exhibition established the background to *boro*-making as an activity that responded to Aomori's severe living conditions in a harsh climate. The exhibition space was set up with a faint glow from the yellow light projected onto each object, and an evocative soundscape playing around the room. The fight for survival was the core spirit of *boro* that the exhibition tried to communicate to the audience. Here I will use an item of *donja* (Figure 6) as example to elaborate on how this exhibition told stories about *boro* and the image that the exhibition tried to convey about it.



**Figure 6.** *Donja* (or *Donza*) Collected from Nanbu district in Aomori Prefecture. Used until the Taisho period (1911-1925). Photograph by Leren Li

The *Donja*, also called *donza*, is a huge sleeping blanket that looks like a padded kimono. Unlike normal sleeping blankets or other large padded kimonos that are usually light and made of cotton, the *donja* is heavy and made of worn-out clothes layered on top of one another. The piece shown above weighs around 15 kilograms, which is not easy to lift, even for an adult. A museum guide was with me throughout my visit, and the *donja* jacket shown in Figure 6 was the example she used to introduce to me the notion of material change that accompanied the development of transportation in the Aomori area.

The exhibition guide would encourage the audience to touch the hemp wadding coming out of the slits in the *donja* jacket. After that, the guide would tell the audience that Aomori was too cold for cotton cultivation, and that hemp was a substitute for cotton in Aomori before the railways were built. As the audience had physically experienced the roughness of the hemp fibre, it would be easier for them to empathise and make a connection with people having to live with no soft, warm garments to keep the cold out. The exhibition identifies Meiji 24 (1891) as the historical moment when cotton circulated in the Tōhoku region, as the Tōhoku Main Line railway opened, connecting Tokyo to Iwate (a prefecture located in the Tōhoku region next to Aomori). This *donja* jacket exemplifies an approach to *boro* making in the period before the general availability of cotton, in which most of the old cotton scraps were pieced together on the surface close to skin, and other bast fibres, such as hemp, became the primary materials for wadding.

The *boro* collection in Amuse Museum was less technique oriented and was interpreted more emotionally. Exhibition notes were mostly based on oral histories told to Tanaka Chūzaburō by local people. The exhibition text panels invited the audience to imagine the desperation of the makers. For example, next to this *donja* jacket, the text panel stated:

... The winter of the northern prefectures are severe, and cold could take lives if one was not prepared. In poor households during pre-war days, this threat was even greater: we

needed our *donja* to be as thick as possible to keep us warm. Spreading straw on the floor, laying a *boro* carpet (a patched cloth) on it, we could finally go to sleep by wearing this thick *donja*... When naked bodies get close to each other, it is simply warm to both the body and heart. ...<sup>7</sup>

The *donja* was used by the whole family: children would sleep naked holding onto their parents inside the *donja*. There are two reasons why they slept naked. One is because of hygiene considerations: people had few opportunities to wash their clothes, and taking them off before going to bed would reduce the breeding opportunities for lice, fleas and small rodents. The other reason, which is relatively more to do with human needs, is that people hoped to bring warmth to each other by touching each other's skin directly.



**Figure 7.** *Donja* jackets and photo of models wearing a *donja* piece  
Photograph by Leren Li

<sup>7</sup> Amuse Museum, *Boro*. Text panel to accompany the *donja* jacket shown in the exhibition *Boro*. Visited on 15 January, 2018.

There was no other supporting evidence, such as written records or images, in the exhibition to confirm the truth of this information. To further construct the story, Tsuzuki photographed a scene of father and daughter sharing an item of *donja*, and this photo was hung on the wall behind the *donja* pieces (figure 7). The dark backdrop led viewers to focus on the models, who stared out at the audience, which created a kind of contact between the two. These photos transformed the imagined scenario into visual form. In his book, Tsuzuki took photographs of a younger couple wearing *boro*, while in the exhibition he put two generations together in the photo to construct a sense of lineage, kinship and human care.

Another method that the exhibition adopted to convey evocative and convincing messages was to tell the stories in the first person. For example, next to the female loincloth (Figure 8), there was a text panel about how women in the house made and wore their underwear:

... It is hard to collect female underwear for research in any cloth collections. They oftentimes disposed of their used underwear as something dirty out of shame to be seen by other people. The female underwear that is left today is therefore very rare and valuable resource as a record of those days.

What the women in the house used to wear when working on the fields was called *mijika* (short robe) and *tattsuke* (working trousers). Once they came back home after working outside, they took off those *mijika* and *tattsuke*, and put on a long kimono made of hemp...

A female loincloth of hemp was also tied around the hips at night as regular house wear. Even though its purpose was not to look lovely or anything of that sort, I am sure that it should have worked as something that would give those women a relaxed feeling at home after long days of work in the fields.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Text panel for hemp loincloth and female underwear. In the exhibition *Boro* at Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.



**Figure 8.** Female loincloths  
Photograph by Leren Li

The entire collection in this exhibition was Tanaka's, and he could justify the veracity of information he provided because he had conducted the oral history research himself, so the audience naturally tended to go along with his narrative of *boro*. The exhibition gave no details of the names and backgrounds of the people who gave Tanaka their *boro* pieces and stories. The labels next to each object simply indicate the name of the piece and its material and function. Objects with similar functions, like female loincloths, were grouped together and given a story from Tanaka's archive. For the audience, it was not clear whether these loincloths were from one person or from many, and whether all the women felt as shameful as the text panel described.

As well as the first-person storytelling, the audience were allowed to touch the textiles in order to "feel" the "authenticity" and "warmth" of the fabrics through a haptic experience. The distance between the objects and the viewers became closer through these interactions, and this also reflected the "humbleness" of *boro*. Thus, what makes *boro* special is not its material scarcity or refined technique, but the human care between the makers and the wearers.

### The Gift of Cloth and Changed Attitudes

Apart from the key message about human care that the exhibition intended to communicate, it also tended to expand the genres of *boro* in terms of different functions and forms. The exhibition gave a definition of *boro* and differentiated it from today's quilts and patchwork. *Boro* was defined as “patched clothing with multiple small cloths”, and the difference between this and today's quilts and patchwork is that *boro* was made purely for the practical purposes of retaining warmth in snowy areas and for its longevity in places where it was hard to obtain any sort of cloth.<sup>9</sup> Functionality was emphasised in the definition, and the exhibition showed a wide range of *boro* to communicate to the audience that *boro* not only applied to sheet-like fabric used for covering futons, as some texts had oversimplified.<sup>10</sup> Scraps that were reused as much as people could, to make new creations in any form that would benefit people's lives, were included in this *boro* exhibition as well. The exhibition showcased various accessories, such as gloves (Figure 9) and *tabi* footwear, that were all made from layered scraps. They were examples to show that *boro* was made not only to provide warmth to the wearer, but also to protect people from getting hurt when they were working on the land.



**Figure 9.** *Tebukuro* (gloves). Photograph by Leren Li

<sup>9</sup> Exhibition introduction, text panel. *Boro*, exhibition at Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Sibella Court, “Boro & Shibori”, in: *Nomad: A Global Approach to Interior Style*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2011), p.28.



The example shown below (Figure 10) is an anti-mosquito headpiece, known as a *kaibushi* in Japanese, and it was made by twisting the fabrics that were too tattered for patching. According to the museum guide, no matter how tiny the scraps were, they could have some use.<sup>11</sup> In the summer, before they started work on the farm people would take a strip from the headband and burn it, because the smoke that indigo dye produced could drive away mosquitoes and other insects. In this way the scraps became a natural mosquito repellent, and the ashes returned to the ground, making the best use of the lifecycle of the fabric.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 10.** *Kaibushi* (anti-mosquito string)  
Photograph by Leren Li

The exhibition featured a wide range of objects to elaborate on the meaning of *boro* in Japanese history, especially in the Tōhoku area. Tanaka Chūzaburō's *boro* collection in Amuse Museum mainly included three categories: bedding, clothes and accessories for various occasions. In terms of bedding, the exhibition showcased examples of futon covers and *donja*. The clothes on display included *gakusei-fuku* (student uniforms), *kodomo-fuku* (children's wear), *shigotogi* (work clothes), and *tanzen* (indoor thermal wear). The rest of the collection

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<sup>11</sup> Text panel for *Kaibushi* (anti-mosquito string). In the exhibition *Boro* at Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

contains *tabi* (socks divided at the toes), *tebukuro* (gloves), *koshimaki* (a type of women's underwear), *kaibushi* (anti-mosquito strings) and piles of unused cotton scraps called *hagire*.

These unused cotton scraps were displayed on a table at the very centre of the exhibition space. In contrast to the heavily patched objects, these scraps seemed useless. Yoshi Cho, the museum guide, told me that these scraps, along with the socks and mittens, were collected from an anonymous woman in the Shimokita Peninsula, which is located in the remote north-eastern cape of the Japanese Honshū Island. The fabrics were assumed to be for making mittens (Figure 9) and *tabi* (Figure 11) for the entire family, because the *tabi* socks in the collection ranged from children's to adult sizes. The soles were all heavily hand-stitched for warmth and strength. The mittens were used for heavy work in the field, and the thumb grips were heavily reinforced with cloth patches. As she was used to the frugal life, the idea of saving and repairing was deeply ingrained in the woman's mind, and her family members no longer wanted them. Therefore, she gave all the fabrics to Tanaka, as she felt that she and Tanaka shared an appreciation of these mended pieces and scraps.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 11.** *Tabi* (split-toed footwear)  
Photograph by Leren Li

<sup>13</sup> Yoshi Cho, interviewed by Leren Li. Tokyo, Amuse Museum, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

Yoshi Cho did not meet Tanaka Chūzaburō in person. She learned about these stories from the museum director, Kiyoshi Tatsumi, who helped to publish the book written by Tanaka: *Everything Has a Heart*.<sup>14</sup> In this book, Tanaka recalled some memorable experiences and conversations during his lifelong collecting journey. The story that I heard from Yoshi Cho is also included in part in Koide and Tsuzuki’s book. According to Cho, these scraps were unused was because the old lady’s family members no longer needed to wear patched clothes and they felt embarrassed about having this unwanted “garbage” at home.<sup>15</sup> In Koide and Tsuzuki’s writing, they quoted an old saying from Aomori: “Tears and bickering over keepsakes,”<sup>16</sup> which according to Tanaka accurately describes funerals in Aomori in earlier days – when someone died, the relatives all cried as they fought over the who got the kimono.<sup>17</sup> Nowadays, with mass-produced garments, these fabrics and *boro* are not needed any more. In the exhibition, the guide would also encourage the audience to think again about how modern fashion influenced Japanese wearing practice in the countryside by telling the story of this disappointed lady.



**Figure 12.** *Furoshiki* (wrap cloth) and fabric scraps. Made between 1950s and 1960s

<sup>14</sup> Chūzaburō Tanaka, *Mono niha Kokoro ga Aru (Everything Has a Heart)* (Tokyo: Amuse Edutainment, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Yoshi Cho, interviewed by Leren Li.

<sup>16</sup> Koide and Tsuzuki, [unpaginated]

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Photograph by Leren Li

The story of the unwanted *boro* discovered by Tanaka, as well as some of the descriptions of him in the exhibition, portray the collector as a hero who gave voice to people's poverty and a second life to *boro*. The exhibition created a sharp contrast between people's changing attitudes towards *boro*. Tsuzuki wrote in the introductory text for the photography exhibition that before *boro* was discovered and exhibited by Tanaka in the mid-1960s, it remained "largely unknown, even intentionally buried as an embarrassing reminder of 'the poverty that was Tōhoku'."<sup>18</sup> And now, after being displayed in Tokyo, *boro* is "gaining an international recognition", and the word "*boro*" now has an "artistic sense attached to it".<sup>19</sup>

In Tsuzuki's descriptions of his *boro* photography exhibition, *Boro: Real Astonishment* there is a sense of power relations going on in the material flow of *boro*, as its artistic value is enhanced through its exposure in Tokyo, and later on in other countries. *Boro*'s artistic value became recognisable, along with the decline in its functional value, when it was collected and displayed in Tokyo. Its value increased further when *boro* was embraced by the Western fashion industry. As the exhibition implied, people who owned *boro* considered it shameful, and if *boro* was "labelled with French or Italian designer tags, these 'not-so-glad rags' would undoubtedly fetch high-end prices."<sup>20</sup> This statement justified the increasing value of *boro* after its recognition by the Western fashion industry. And the poor people of the north can be grateful to Tanaka, who took their stuff and put it on display.

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<sup>18</sup> Kyōichi Tsuzuki, introductory text, *Boro: Real Astonishment*. Amuse Museum 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Exhibition. Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. 30 march 2018 to 31 March 2019. Visited on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Exhibition introduction, text panel. *Boro* exhibition at Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Kyōichi Tsuzuki, introductory text, *Boro: Real Astonishment*. Amuse Museum 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Exhibition. Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. 30 march 2018 to 31 March 2019. Visited on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

## Reading *Boro* with Design Thinking

This section has now discussed two key messages that the exhibition at Amuse Museum tried to convey to the audience: the significance of human care in a harsh environment and the appreciation of the things we have. The last statement that this exhibition inspires me to reconsider is: Can we read *boro* as a designed piece? Or is it made unconsciously? From a viewer's perspective, certain information I received from the labels and the guide implied that people who lived in a severe environment with barely any fabric options still tried their best to appear decent in front of other people. And I will use three examples to explain how *boro* is interpreted as a designed object in this exhibition.

The *donja* shown in Figure 13, according to the text panel next to the piece, is used as a sleeping blanket, or as a warm shawl around the hearth.<sup>21</sup> The outer surface is made by using the *sakiori* technique, tearing the waste fabric into strips and weaving it together. In contrast to the colourful exterior of the jacket, its interior lining is made from multiple layers of worn-out indigo cloths: the colour has faded, and the tears are exposed there. Because of the scarcity of colourful fabrics, as Cho said, this jacket was a precious family possession, and it would be used by guests as a courtesy.<sup>22</sup> From the weaving techniques and colour arrangement, it reflects the visual balance that the maker was trying to create. Although it is hard to prove whether the “kind offer for guests” story is true, this still functions as evidence to highlight the design thinking in this piece.

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<sup>21</sup> Text panel for *donja*. In the exhibition *Boro* at Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Yoshi Cho, interviewed by Leren Li. Tokyo, Amuse Museum, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.



**Figure 13.** *Donja*.  
Photograph by Leren Li

With discarded scraps, women could make shoes, socks, and gloves for their family. Given the emphasis that is placed on *boro* as a fabric of desperation and utility, the inclusion of small details of colour in some garments demanded further explanation. The colours and patterns of the scraps were usually plain and dingy, but when pieces of brightly coloured fabrics were found, women found ways to reward themselves by incorporating these – small pieces of red fabric, for instance – into a secret corner of their garments or underwear.<sup>23</sup> The colour red in Japan symbolises luck and prosperity, and red fabric was also precious because the red dye was hard to obtain before chemical dyes were introduced. Some elders also said that if a girl’s wedding dress had something red on it, the wedding gift she received from her future husband should be tripled.<sup>24</sup> Figure 14 shows a pair of women’s work trousers with a tiny red selvedge. The other example, in Figure 15, is an item of children’s clothing made from very soft worn-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

out cotton pieces. With limited resources, women still tried their best to decorate their garments with something colourful. The examples show that people did have aesthetic considerations when they made them, as these patches are not for the purpose of repair, but are thoughtfully put there as decoration and to offer sincere wishes to the wearers. These tiny scraps are evidence of living conditions, but more importantly the details on the garments represent an attitude of patience in tribulation, showing that even in conditions of poverty women in rural villages still embellished their clothing as much as they could.



**Figure 14 (left).** *Tattsuke* Leg Cover. Collected from Nanbu District in Aomori prefecture

**Figure 15 (right).** Children's clothes. Collected from Aomori prefecture

Photograph by Leren Li

In feudal Japan, especially in the countryside, suburban housewives were expected to make clothes for their families, and girls started to learn needlework when they were around six years old or even younger.<sup>25</sup> Before they were introduced to their future husband, a piece

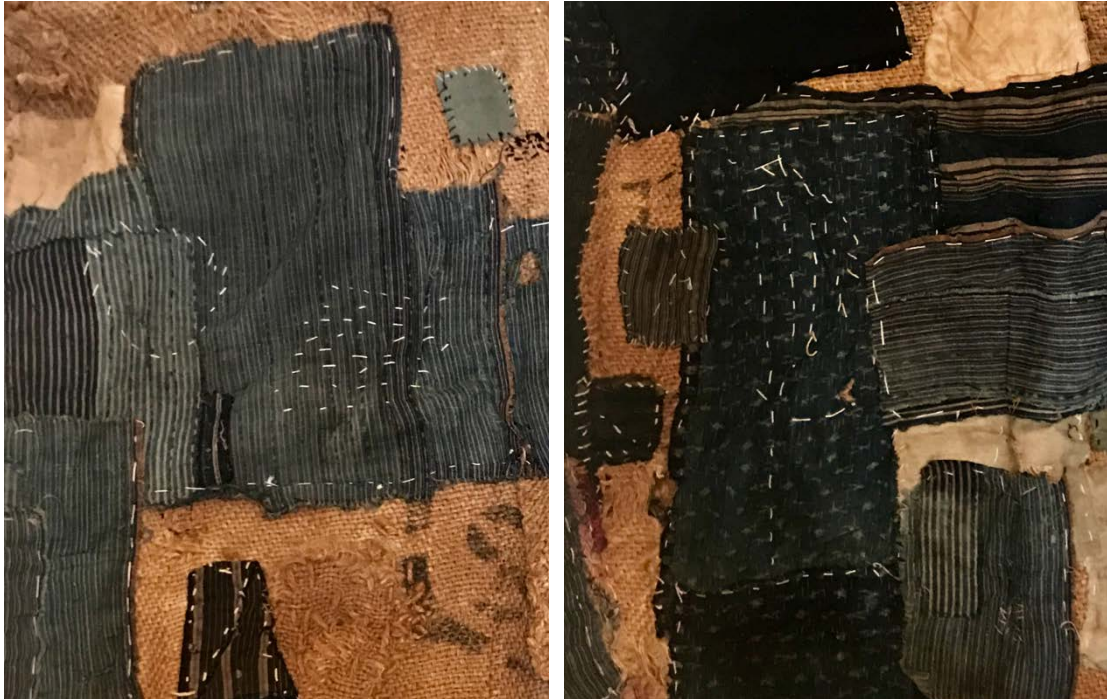
<sup>25</sup> Mitsu Oshima, "Learn to Sew", in: Junichi Saga, *Memories of Silk and Straw: A Self-Portrait of Small-Town Japan* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1990), p.141.

of textile demonstrating the girl's needlework would be presented to the fiancé's family to prove her ability to become a suitable wife. Therefore, *boro* became an ideal fabric for girls to practise their needlework skills on. Figure 16 shows a futon cover with extensive stitching on the surface, and the practice stitching in the other example is sewn on a coin bag (Figure 17). Usually there are some irregular stitching lines on the *boro* fabrics – these were not stitched for reinforcement but for practice. Girls chose heavily patched futons or bags to practise on because they were less valuable, and the stitches would not be easily noticed. Although these fabrics were not stitched with a design purpose, twenty-first-century *boro* cultures are creating the conditions within which the girls' practice stitches are seen as beautiful and something to be treasured.



**Figure 16.** Futon cover  
Collection of Amuse Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li





**Figure 17.** Details of a *zeni-bukuro* (coin bag), from the early twentieth century.  
Collected by Mingei Gallery, Paris.  
Photograph by Leren Li

In general, Amuse Museum has played an important role in introducing *boro* to the world, for several reasons. First of all, the museum kept an incomparably large number of *boro* pieces, far more than in other museum collections. Secondly, the central location of the museum next to the Sensō-Ji Temple tourist attraction brought many foreign visitors and spread knowledge about *boro* widely. The third reason, the ten-years that Tanaka's *boro* collection was displayed for, is that it gave the exhibition organisers time and space to construct the story by combining various forms of supporting materials, such as a photography exhibition, relevant publications and media exposure. From 2009 to 2017, Tanaka Chūzaburō's book *Everything Has a Heart* was reprinted for four times.<sup>26</sup> His name and his collection are closely connected with Amuse Museum. In an article published in *AXIS* magazine in 2016, the author Toguchi Toshiko described the collection in Amuse Museum as like collage art which resembled

<sup>26</sup> Chūzaburō Tanaka, *Mono niha Kokoro ga Aru (Everything Has a Heart)*. (Tokyo: Amuse Edutainment, 2011).

abstract paintings that could be touched.<sup>27</sup>

However, the connection between the collector and museum raises concerns about whether this exhibition reflects the full picture of *boro*'s history. As a museum that exhibited *boro* for ten years, Amuse Museum has been dedicated to telling a story about *boro* as a long-lost cultural heritage that is a part of the history of a region in northern Japan, specifically Aomori, and embodies the spirit of human care, the fight for survival and cherishing of resources. In Amuse Museum, the knowledge, discourses, texts and images were produced with an appeal to *mottainai*, family ties, and a nostalgic interest in historical tales of the frozen north. The sources to support these interpretations of *boro* mostly came from one collector and his poetic telling of the makers' stories. The audience, especially a non-Japanese one, might have assumed that *boro* was exclusive to Aomori. In the next section, the research will use examples from the Aomori Prefectural Museum and the Aomori Museum of History to review the interpretation of "*boro*" in its "birthplace". The *Boro* exhibition in Amuse Museum did not provide enough historical evidence to build the full context of *boro*, and in the next section I will explore the creation of *boro* in relation to the geographical environment and the development of the cotton manufacturing industry.

### **Searching for *Boro* in Aomori**

Tōhoku, meaning "northeast region", consists of the north-eastern portion of Honshū Island. There are six prefectures located in the Tōhoku region, including Aomori, Akita, Iwate, Miyagi, Yamagata and Fukushima (Figure 18). Tōhoku is known as "Snow Country" in Japan, and the northernmost area of Tōhoku is where Aomori is located.<sup>28</sup> People's everyday clothing

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<sup>27</sup> Toshiko Toguchi, "From *boro* to BORO: The Beauty of Fabric and Memories of Clothing Instilled Through Japanese Handwork". *AXIS*, 182 (August 2016), p.46-49.

<sup>28</sup> Yukiko Koide and Kyōichi Tsuzuki, *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan*. (Tokyo: ASPECT Corp., 2009). [unpaginated]

in various regions of Japan respond to the changing environment, the climate and forms of economic activity. As the Japanese archipelago is narrow but extends in length from north to south, differences in climate are significant between the different zones of the country. According to the data collected by Japan Meteorological Agency in 2014, Aomori's annual snowy period can last for around 110 days, with the deepest accumulation being about 87 centimetres.<sup>29</sup> Physically walking around in the snowy city did evoke my empathy for those people who lived without the protection of soft, warm fabrics. In the meantime, the aim of this trip was to find out how the stories about *boro* are told here, and to explore other ways to think about the relationship between *boro* and this region.



**Figure 18.** Map of Tōhoku region  
(Wikipedia Commons)

<sup>29</sup> “Climate in Aomori. Aomori Sightseeing Guide”, *Aomori Prefectural Government*, available at: [https://www.en-aomori.com/visitor\\_info/climate.html](https://www.en-aomori.com/visitor_info/climate.html) [Accessed 15 July 2018]

As this chapter introduced earlier, Tanaka Chūzaburō was born in Aomori, and the majority of his collections were from his home town and nearby villages. Among his collection, 786 pieces of *sashiko* mended clothing have been designated National Cultural Properties and 520 spinning and weaving tools are Prefectural Cultural Properties.<sup>30</sup> These clothes are currently held at the Aomori Prefectural Museum.

The Aomori Prefectural Museum was opened in 1973, set up as an educational institution to cultivate a spirit of pride in the local people's hometown with scientific ideas for the celebration of one hundred years since the Meiji period.<sup>31</sup> According to Mr Masuta Kimiyasu, the current director of the Aomori Prefectural Museum, the 786 clothing items from Tanaka Chūzaburō's collection are currently in the museum's private collection, and are unavailable to the public. The museum is taking care of them but has no plans to display these items in the permanent exhibition.<sup>32</sup> For visitors who are interested, the museum published a catalogue, *Tsugaru and Nanbu Sashiko Kimono* (Figure 19), which features all the items in Tanaka's collection. These items exemplify the signature *sashiko* techniques that originated in Aomori prefecture: *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi*. The collection includes long jackets (175 pieces), short jackets (174 pieces), sleeveless jackets (76 pieces), close-fitting trousers (21 pieces), aprons (37 pieces) and loose working trousers (303 pieces), primarily made from cotton and hemp. *Sashiko* stitches used in the collection are used for both decorative and functional purposes. Although I wasn't able to see the collection, from the pictures in the catalogue indigo is still the dominant colour, but brighter palettes are commonly used to decorate aprons and some small areas of the garments.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

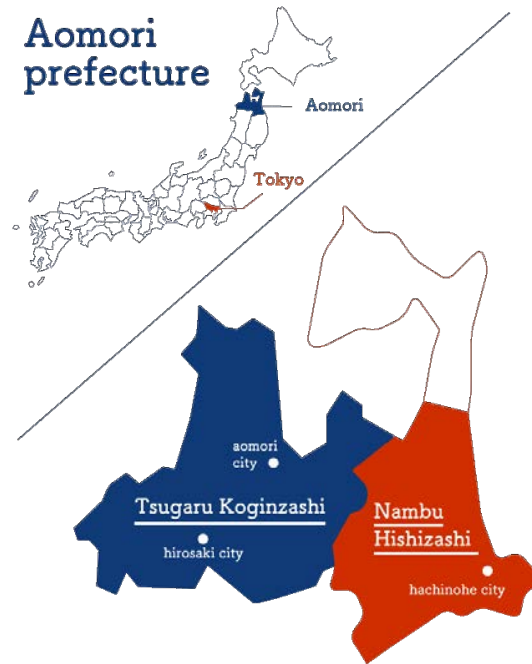
<sup>31</sup> "Museum Chronology", *Aomori Prefectural Museum*, available at: <https://www.kyodokan.com/aboutus/>

<sup>32</sup> Masuta Kimiyasu, email to Leren Li, 14 December 2018.



**Figure 19.** Cover page of Tanaka Chūzaburō's collection catalogue. Published by Aomori Prefectural Museum in 2012.

Aomori prefecture consists of three regions: Tsugaru, Nanbu and Shimokita (Figure 20). People from each region have their own unique accents, lifestyles and customs, as well as their own cultural heritage. As discussed in Chapter One, the techniques of *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi* are two representative regional *sashiko* techniques that are practised throughout the country. The 786 pieces selected by the Aomori Prefectural Museum were chosen mainly to create a record of original *sashiko* samples from Aomori, and each of them is carefully documented with drawings and data detailing their size, material and place of origin and so on.



**Figure 20.** Map of Aomori Prefecture and three cultural regions  
(the unmarked area is Shimokita)  
Picture courtesy of Kogin Bank, koginbank.com

In his article *The Characteristics of Kogin*, Yanagi Sōetsu discussed “*kogin*’s particular beauty”, and he used a specific example from Tsugaru.<sup>33</sup> Yanagi described his feelings about the winter in Tsugaru as “overwhelming oppression”, and *kogin* was an indoor work that absorbs “the endless period of time”, and also an outcome revealing a “connection between snow and work that is down with the hands.”<sup>34</sup> Yanagi appreciated the beauty of *kogin* for several reasons: firstly, *kogin* provides a supreme example of a Japanese regional handicraft made according to strict rules. And Yanagi believed that the female makers would create a solid and steady pattern relying on the power of the strict order and tradition.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, Yanagi suggested that making *kogin* was a sign of womanhood, and it provided an opportunity for friendly rivalry.<sup>36</sup> Although Yanagi didn’t specifically mention “*boro*”, he did focus on the use of *kogin* stitches by women for quilting and repair purposes, writing: “By stitching cotton

<sup>33</sup> Sōetsu Yanagi, “The Characteristics of Kogin,” Translated by Michael Brase. in *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2018), p.129.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.130.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.132.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.133.

onto hemp, the cold hemp became warmer. Over time this work became the province of women and a source of pride. The history of *kogin* is the history of utility being transformed into beauty.”<sup>37</sup> Yanagi’s praise of *kogin* shows its distinctions from *boro*, as *kogin* better exemplifies a regional work rooted in utility and adhering to the law of tradition. To some extent, this also explains Aomori Prefectural Museum’s decision to display *kogin* instead of the more widely practised and ruleless *boro*. Moreover, Yanagi’s emphasise on the labour behind work is also a reminder of the importance of recognising the frequent absence of female voices when *boro*, the women’s work, is on display.

As a visitor, I could still feel the heavily repaired “*boro*-ness” from the pictures, even though the term “*boro*” was not used in this catalogue. When asked about this point, museum director Masuta Kimiyasu explained that the people who wore these *boro*-like clothes in Aomori often called them “*bodo*”.<sup>38</sup> Kimiyasu suggested that the word “*boro*” was standard Japanese, in other words “urban Japanese”,<sup>39</sup> while in Aomori, people with a Tōhoku dialect would normally call it “*bodo*”.<sup>40</sup> The meaning of the word “*bodo*” also varied in different areas. According to Kimiyasu, in the village of Morita in the Tsugaru district, a garment with every part of it stitched was called “*bodo*”, and one with only the body part stitched was referred to as “*donja*”.<sup>41</sup> However, in the city of Nakasato, also in Tsugaru, the native town of two female donors, a kimono with *kasuri* patterns was called a “*bodo*”, while a garment with sleeves made of handloomed fabrics and the body made of *kasuri* was referred to as a “*donja*”.<sup>42</sup> For local people in Aomori, there is actually no consensus on the terminology for mended garments; “*boro*” would be more frequently used to communicate with foreign visitors. For example,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.135.

<sup>38</sup> Masuta Kimiyasu, email to Leren Li, 6 March 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Sukeichi, Narumi, *Tsugaru no kotoba: Tugaru dialect*, Vol.10 (Aomori: Publication Committee on Editing of the *Tugaru no kotoba*, 1961). Source provided by Masuta Kimiyasu.

<sup>41</sup> Masuta Kimiyasu, email to Leren Li, 6 March 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

most of the textile pieces were displayed in the exhibition about Aomori folklore history, while neither “*boro*” nor “*bodo*” was shown in the object description labels. The garments were labelled according to what they were originally called, such as *donja* (figure 21) and *saru momohiki* (hunter’s trousers, Figure 22), with no further description of the repairs made to them.



**Figure 21.** *Donja*. Collected by Aomori Prefectural Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li



**Figure 22.** *Saru momohiki*. Collected by Aomori Prefectural Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li



Figure 23 shows the third part of the exhibition, “Clothing × Life”, which focused on people’s lives in relation to textiles. These repaired garments were displayed together with other home-made textiles and some occupational tools that local people used for hunting, farming and living, including a weaving machine, a hemp steaming tub, a shuttle, a spinning machine and so on. The two types of *sashiko* stitching, *Tsugaru kogin sashi* and *Nanbu hishi sashi*, as well as the *sakiori* weaving technique, were pointed out, while the term “*boro*” was missing throughout the exhibition. The idea of repairing garments did exist in Aomori, but the evocative stories were not highlighted as much as they were at Amuse Museum. Although both museums showed the repaired textiles acquired from local households from the Tōhoku region, the objects shown in the Aomori Prefectural Museum were treated more like historic artefacts: some are displayed behind the glass, and visitors were not allowed to touch any of the objects.



**Figure 23.** “Clothing × Life”  
Aomori Prefectural Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li

In another museum that I visited in Aomori, the Aomori Museum of History, the term “*boro*” is also missing. As the example in Figure 24 shows, the patched jacket was labelled as “*sakiori*” to emphasise the weaving technique that originated in northern Japan to protect

against the extreme cold. Both museums in Aomori introduced the technical terms that were adopted in the making or repairing process. Compared with “*boro*”, those terms were more specific, with clear indications of how to carry out the repair. The Aomori Prefectural Museum and the Aomori Museum of History aim to introduce the history and folk culture of the prefecture and the city, and Amuse Museum focuses on one category of repaired textiles, all of which are from one collector. The differences in approach between the museums in Aomori and Amuse Museum explain the different presentations and interpretations of “*boro*”. In Amuse Museum, the exhibition introduces “*boro*” on a micro level, through individuals’ life stories. But the exhibitions in Aomori tell a regional history from various aspects, and textile is part of the discourse. The exhibitions inspired this research to further consider the connection between *boro* and the Tōhoku region in relation to other factors, such as natural disasters.



**Figure 24.** *Sakiori*  
Aomori Museum of History  
Photograph by Leren Li

## Creativity in a Disaster-Prone Region

Tōhoku is a disaster-prone region. According to the Japanese policy researcher Toshihiko Hayashi, the total number of natural disasters worldwide from 1900 to 2010 was 12169, of which 34 per cent were concentrated in Asian countries. Japan is the country with the highest frequency of natural disasters among developed countries.<sup>43</sup> On 11 March 2011, the Tōhoku region was hit by a mega-earthquake of 9.0 magnitude. The seismic activity was not single-peaked but was followed by large-scale aftershocks, one after another. Tōhoku shook for three minutes, and this created a massive tsunami that devastated the seaboard area in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures. The tsunami caused the Fukushima nuclear accident, and it came to be known as the worst nuclear accident since the Chernobyl accident in 1986.<sup>44</sup> However, this was not the first time that an extraordinary disaster had created destruction in the Tōhoku region. Records from the late nineteenth century show that the Tōhoku region was frequently ravaged by earthquakes and tsunamis: there was the 1894 Shokai earthquake in Yamagata prefecture; the 1896 Meiji-Sanriku earthquake that caused a tsunami that occurred off the coast of Sanriku in Iwate prefecture, and the historically significant Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. One report on the 1896 Meiji-Sanriku earthquake and tsunami by the Imperial Earthquake Investigation Committee (IEIC, *Shisai yobō chōsakai*) in 1896 described it thus:

The tsunami of the evening of the fifteenth of this month was a massive seismic sea wave unprecedented since the Ansei era [1856]. The eastern coast of Miyagi Prefecture and the coastal areas of adjacent prefectures have suffered considerable destruction. The status of the bays and inlets of Miyagi Prefecture is cruelly tragic in

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<sup>43</sup> Toshihiko Hayashi, "Japan's Post-Disaster Economic Reconstruction: From Kobe to Tohoku", *Asian Economic Journal*, 26:3 (2012), p.190.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

the extreme. Several thousand are dead and injured and the homes and vessels washed away or destroyed are too numerous to count. There is no town or village along the coast that has not suffered severe damage. In the worst case, entire villages have been washed away or destroyed.<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 25.** Local residents standing among debris after the Sanriku earthquake and tsunami in 1896. Photograph courtesy of *Japan Times* [japantimes.co.jp](http://japantimes.co.jp)

The Meiji Sanriku earthquake occurred during the evening hours of the local Boys' Festival, and the tsunami waves arrived while celebrations were still under way. Estimates of the death toll vary because conditions made a precise count impossible. According to the report of the IEIC, 26,360 perished, making it the deadliest tsunami in Japan's history in absolute

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<sup>45</sup> Shisai yobō chōsakai, "Sanriku chihou tsunami ihō (sansho dai-yon)," (Information on Tsunami at the Sanriku Area (Reference No. 4)), quoted by Gregory Smits, in *When the Earth Roars: Lessons from the History of Earthquakes in Japan*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p.96.

terms.<sup>46</sup> A local newspaper serving Miyagi prefecture, the *Ōu Nichinichi Shinbun*, published a poem, and later other newspapers began to devote space to literary works inspired by the disaster.

A dragon suddenly rears up from the sea floor  
 The headlong flood of a massive tide  
 Ten thousand cries of suffering, no time to flee  
 Rows of villages swept away in an instant, silent  
 The air fill of bitterness, cruel rains fall from heaven  
 Cries blanket the earth, an apprehensive wind blows  
 What is the crime of these countless souls?  
 The dead are unattended, the living starve  
 Corpses strewn along the roads  
 No smoke from the stoves, no jacket to wear  
 The utmost bitterness – a child has lost its mother  
 The solitary cries of those rendered unknown  
 Among the world's catastrophes, can anything compare?  
 I want to shed tears of blood  
 Our emperor, most benevolent, has bestowed cast treasure  
 The people weep tears of gratitude.<sup>47</sup>

It is difficult for suffering people to recover from their feelings of insecurity within a short time period. Japan's indigenous textile traditions utilised raw materials acquired directly from native plants which were foraged for in nature or cultivated on farms. Earthquakes and tsunamis in the northern region inevitably reduced the resources people could obtain from agriculture, and in this case, they were forced to look for other ways to find materials to wear. As historian Gregory Smits argues in his book *Seismic Japan*, earthquakes produced new ideas about human agency vis-à-vis notions of seismicity and society in modern Japan.<sup>48</sup> Throughout

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<sup>46</sup> Gregory Smits, p.98.

<sup>47</sup> Katsumine Takahashi, "Bun'en: Daikaishō kiji (Sensha kadai)," *Ōu nichinichi shinbun*, July 22, 1896.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory Smits, *Seismic Japan: The Long History and Continuing Legacy of the Ansei Edo Earthquake*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), p.4.

this disaster in the Tōhoku region, people's living conditions became even more severe: the total financial cost of the 1896 disaster was between 7,100,000 and 8,700,000 yen, approximately 10 per cent of the national budget for that year.<sup>49</sup> The Meiji Sanriku earthquake and tsunami presented several interrelated social challenges, particularly because of the relative isolation of the Tōhoku region. Basic infrastructure had to be rebuilt, along with homes and fishing boats, as a foundation for reviving the local economy.

Following Smits' research, earthquakes and tsunamis can be seen as a catalyst for socio-economic change in Tōhoku. Watching their homes being destroyed and rebuilt time after time made people aware of the need to improve their living circumstances to get protection. Their lifestyles, aesthetics and craft practices would also be influenced accordingly. For example, the previous chapter discussed the correlation between geo-cultural conditions and the development of *kintsugi* objects in Japan. The earthquake-related hardship and scarcity could also be factors that relate to the significant amount of *boro* made in this region. The respect for the power of nature and the repair mindset cannot be separated from the reconstruction of local people's homeland. This also positions *boro* as a material object that has the capacity of affect, which engages with the senses and potential perceptions of damage and repair. As Deleuze and Guattari state, the "affect" of things does not operate in isolation, but has relations, and works in sensory compounds.<sup>50</sup> Reusing fabrics and giving the clothes a second life is, on one hand, a passive choice decided by the environment; on the other, it is a choice that connects with religious beliefs of reincarnation and the pursuit of rebirth, as discussed in Chapter One in relation to the concept of *mottainai*. *Boro* triggers not only memories of insecurity and catastrophe from disasters, but also care and hope.

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<sup>49</sup> Nobuo Shutō and Shun'ichi Koshimura, "Meiji Sanriku jishin tsunami ni yoru higai," in Meiji *Sanriku jishin tsunami hōkokusho* [1896], ed. Chuō bōsai kaigi (2005), p.45-46.

<sup>50</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.168.

“Patchwork” exhibitions in Japan may, therefore, not only show the distinctive handed-down knowledge and sense of beauty of the people in Japan who had to survive in a land with scarce resources and continuous natural disasters, but also construct other ideas about the dynamic willpower of the Japanese people, who have never given up despite huge difficulties. The Amuse Museum’s special exhibition *Bodoko, the Life Cloth* further exemplified the humanity of ordinary people during hard times in Japan.

### ***Boro* and Cotton Development in Japan**

In the writing by Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, Koide Yukiko and Tsuzuki Kyōichi that is discussed in this thesis, the shortage of cotton is noted as an essential reason why poor Tōhoku villagers patched their garments with leftover scraps. The exhibition in Amuse Museum also suggests that *boro* was created because cotton was hard to grow and produce in the Tōhoku region. The history of *boro* cannot be separated from the development of cotton production in the Tōhoku region, but not much research on cotton was evident in Amuse Museum’s *boro* exhibition.

Cotton’s birthplace was the Indus Valley, and the earliest cotton cultivation and manufacturing developed between 2300 and 1760 BCE.<sup>51</sup> The cotton plant also found its way to China by the thirteenth century, and became widely cultivated in China and other regions of East Asia.<sup>52</sup> Compared to other Asian countries, Japan was very late in starting to cultivate cotton plants. It took about two hundred years for cotton to reach Japan from China by way of the Korean Peninsula in the fifteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Unlike bast fibres, that had to be foraged for

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<sup>51</sup> Beverly Lemire, *Cotton* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2011), p.11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>53</sup> Shinichirō Yoshida and Dai Williams, “The History of Cotton in Japan”, in: *Riches from Rags: Saki-ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1994), p.19.

and were arduous to process, ply and weave, cotton plants could be cultivated; its yield was easy to spin, it eagerly absorbed indigo dye and, more importantly, cotton kept the body warm in winter. When cotton production began in Japan, it was confined to warmer regions like the Tsukushi Plain in Kyushu, and the northernmost limit for cultivating cotton was Fukushima prefecture.

Before ordinary people has access to cotton, fibres that were used to weave cloth came from the wild trees and plants that grew in the mountains and in the fields: paper mulberry, linden, elm, wisteria, kudzu, banana fibre, hemp, ramie, and nettle.<sup>54</sup> The thread-making process of these bast fibres is quite complicated and varies between tree-produced fibres and grass-produced fibres. The knowledge of fibre production has no direct connection with *boro*, but some textiles gallerists have been working on educating *boro* enthusiasts on related knowledge. For example, in the exhibition *The Fabric of Life: Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan*, which included *boro* and other Japanese textiles, curators Stephen Szczepanek and Kawasaki Kei wrote about the fibre production process as part of the history of Japanese mending culture in the catalogue:

...for trees, the layer between the bark and the wood is peeled and removed, then boiled with ash for a long time, and fermented. Then the fibre can be taken out. For grasses, after cutting, they are boiled until the outer layer dissolves (hemp) or they are shaved with a blade (ramie) to remove the fibre. The resulting fibre is torn into pieces and tied or braided together piece by piece to create a longer thread, this process is called ply-joining.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Reiko Mochinaga Brandon, *Country Textiles of Japan: The Art of Tsutsugaki*. (New York: Weatherhill, 1986), p.40.

<sup>55</sup> Kei Kawasaki and Stephen Szczepanek, *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life: Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan* (catalogue) (Portland, OR: Portland Japanese Garden, 2015), p.34.



The description of fibre production above implies that mending garments might not have been done simply because of the cold. Warmer regions in the south may also have used patchwork stitching to reinforce garments, as natural fibres are quite fragile. In an attempt to increase the durability of garments made from these fabrics, women used a needle and spare bast fibres to fill the background fabric with darning stitches. The following example (Figure 26) shows the detail of a delicately patched garment woven from hemp debris, in which the left-over fibres from making fine hemp yarn have been re-spun. When cotton became more readily available through domestic cultivation, and was widely distributed through increased trade routes, it began to replace bast fibres for both stitching and weaving due to its strength, warmth and softness. Compared with the locally available bast fibres like hemp or ramie, the introduction of cotton fibre offered significant benefits for the construction of people's everyday clothes.



**Figure 26.** Hemp patched jacket  
Sri textile gallery, New York.  
Photograph by Leren Li

When cotton production began in Japan during the fifteenth century, cotton was mainly cultivated in warmer regions such as Kawachi, on the Inland Sea, and the Tsukushi Plain in Kyushu.<sup>56</sup> During the Edo period (1600-1868), the Tokugawa Shogunate ruled Japan as the last feudal military government. Throughout the Edo period, silk was restricted to a privileged handful of samurai class families, and cotton was the fabric that was most commonly used by ordinary people. Cotton cultivation, cotton processing and cotton marketing were developed mostly in the Kinai region (capital region) during much of the Tokugawa period.<sup>57</sup> Cotton's warmth and its other qualities made it more sought after than hemp and other bast fibres. As the economy developed during the Edo period, and as the demand for cotton increased, cotton became a valuable cash crop for the Japanese feudal lords.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the cotton trade became an important element of the economic life of Ōsaka and the surrounding provinces of Settsu, Kawachi, and Izumi.<sup>59</sup> Demand for cotton cloth was high in urban areas, and the technology for transforming the cotton from its harvested form into cloth was mostly concentrated in cities like Ōsaka.

According to the historian William Hauser, the group of Ōsaka merchants who dominated the cotton business by the 1660s were authorised to form a trading group and regulate the distribution system which channelled harvested cotton from the cultivators to Ōsaka for processing and sale.<sup>60</sup> The construction of a monopoly market limited the commercial activities of the village producers and rural merchants and denied them the

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<sup>56</sup> Shin-ichiro Yoshida and Dai Williams, "Kitamaesen", in: *Riches from Rags: Recycled Clothing and Other Textile Traditions* (San Francisco: Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1994), p.19.

<sup>57</sup> William B. Hauser, "The Diffusion of Cotton Processing and Trade in The Kinai Region in Tokugawa Japan", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33: 4 (1974), p.633-649.

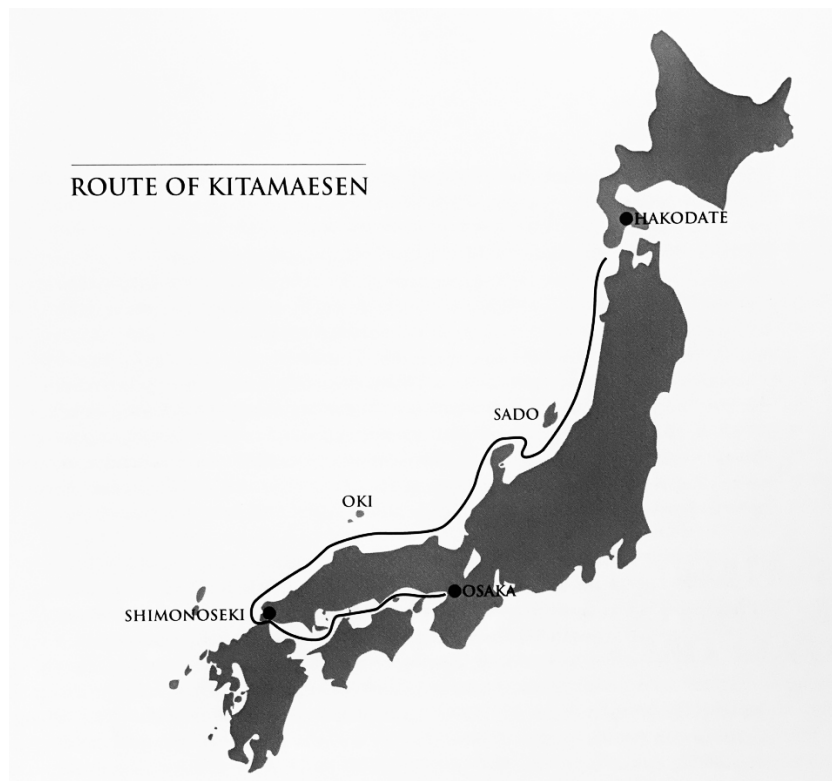
<sup>58</sup> Stephen Szczepanek, "Riches from Rags, Boro Textiles from Japan", *Hali: The International Journal of Oriental Carpets and Textiles*, 158, p.45.

<sup>59</sup> William B. Hauser, "The Diffusion of Cotton Processing and Trade in The Kinai Region in Tokugawa Japan", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33: 4 (1974), p.633-49.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

opportunity to sell cotton to other regions.<sup>61</sup> When cotton was mostly manufactured to satisfy the demand in the commercial centres of Ōsaka and Edo (Tokyo), farmers in other regions could only use leftover cotton, or substitutes such as bast fibres. The cotton monopoly lasted until 1823, when it was challenged by an uprising of 1007 villages against the government. After 1823, cotton cultivators and village merchants were authorised to ship and sell cotton to other provinces without the Ōsaka merchants' permission. For people living in the far north of Japan, more cotton fabrics, both new and used, could now be shipped to them via the northern coastal route, Kitamaesen, which offered a commercial shipping route from Ōsaka to the northern island of Hokkaidō, established during the Edo period.<sup>62</sup>



**Figure 27.** Map of Japan showing the Kitamaesen Route.  
 In; *Riches from Rags: Recycled Clothing and Other Textile Traditions*.  
 San Francisco: San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum

<sup>61</sup> William B. Hauser, “The Osaka Cotton Trade: Establishment and Consolidation”, in: *Economic Institutional Change in Tokugawa Japan: Osaka and the Kinai Cotton Trade* (Cambridge; London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p.59-84.

<sup>62</sup>Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “Boro no Bi: Beauty in Humility – Repaired Cotton Rags of Old Japan”, in: *Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Symposium 2004*, 458, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004), available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/458/>

In *Riches from Rags: Recycled Clothing and Other Textile Traditions*, Yoshida Shin-ichiro and Dai Williams described the ships and trade along the Kitamaesen route:

[...] The largest ships were capable of carrying about 150 tons and had a crew of 15 to 20. They were made entirely of wood, had no keel and were propelled by a single sail initially made of hemp, and later of cotton. They were really just floating markets for the most part. [...] They would pick up fish fertiliser and oil at the end of their journey at Hokkaido; they would take on ‘tax rice’ in the rich rice producing areas and return with these cargoes to Sakai (a city on Ōsaka Bay). In the opposite direction they carried salt, paper, sugar, sake and other basic commodities, including cotton.<sup>63</sup>

Yoshida and Williams’ research shows that of the cotton shipped to the north, new cotton was destined for urban and middle-class markets while used cotton, including the fragments, was collected by farmers, fishermen and other poorer commoners as materials for *sakiori* and *sashiko*.<sup>64</sup> However, not everyone in the north could benefit from the trade route, and cities like Aomori were excluded from the cotton trade. As the map in Figure 27 shows, the distribution channel could not cover the whole of the northern region: it could only reach the west coast on its way to Hokkaido. Although the city of Aomori has the highest snowfall of any prefectural capital in Japan, it was still difficult for people to find cotton to wear against the bitter climate.<sup>65</sup> In 1892, when the Tōhoku Main Line railway line opened, people in the isolated mountain villages of Aomori could finally obtain more cotton, both new and waste, from the southern regions. Before this, people had to spin the hemp and hand-loom the fibre threads into usable fabrics. Everything from work clothes to nappies to futon covers for the long winter nights was sewn from stiff, scratchy hemp cloth. And if a single layer wasn’t

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<sup>63</sup> Yoshida and Williams, “Kitamaesen”, p.14

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>65</sup> Koide and Tsuzuki, [unpaginated].

warm enough, the rural housewives stitched and reinforced layer on layer, patching holes and stuffing hemp fuzz in between for whatever insulation they could get.

Yoshida and Williams point out in the book that there are almost no records of the origins of these textile repair traditions, and, based on historical facts and their speculation, they argue that “these traditions must have been generated in part as a result of the Kitamaesen trade”.<sup>66</sup> As they further describe, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Kitamaesen ships called at northern ports in Niigata, Yamagata, Akita and Aomori, and sailors went ashore in their cotton work clothes, probably praising their warmth and comfort to those they met.<sup>67</sup> These contacts and exchange of materials also marked the beginning of a cultural diffusion. As well as the transportation of cotton to the north, female labour is another factor that should be considered in relation to the development of the cotton industry in Japan.

### **Labour Migration and Poverty in Rural Areas**

As the first nation in Asia to industrialise, Japan’s rapid social and economic development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries widened the gap between the rich and the poor, and the Japanese cotton industry led Japan’s industrial development from the Meiji period until the beginning of the era of high-speed growth following World War II.<sup>68</sup> In 1867, the first Japanese cotton mill equipped with modern machinery had been built at Kagoshima, the southernmost city on the Kyushu island.<sup>69</sup> The textile industry was the first in Japan to institute both mechanisation and a factory system. While the government initially owned and operated chemical industries, railways, mines, and munitions factories, the

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<sup>66</sup> Yoshida and Williams, p.16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Takeshi Abe, “Organizational Changes in the Japanese Cotton Industry During the Inter-War period”, in: Douglas A. Farnie and David J. Jeremy (eds.), *The Fibre that Changed the World: The Cotton Industry in International Perspective, 1600-1990s*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.461.

<sup>69</sup> All Japan Cotton Spinners’ Association, *The Story of the Japanese Cotton Textile Industry*. (Ōsaka: All Japan Cotton Spinners’ Association, 1957), p.15.

manufacture of cotton and silk was, from the very beginning, entirely in private hands.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the textile industry was at the forefront of Japan's modern industrial efforts. From the 1880s, cotton manufacturers started organising collectively to form the Japan Cotton Spinners' Association (Dai Nippon Menshi Bōseki Dōgyō Rengōkai) – one of the earliest manufacturers' associations in Japan which attempted to take control of producers' access to labour.<sup>71</sup>

On the import side, Japan has a long history of importing raw cotton from United States. According to data from the All Japan Spinners' Association, in 1898 raw cotton imports from the United States amounted to 213,000 bales, and since then the volume of United States raw cotton imports has fluctuated from year to year.<sup>72</sup> However, the imported cotton was not used domestically but transformed into finished textile products for export. In the early twentieth century the cotton and silk industries dominated Japan's foreign trade: in 1913, silk and cotton together comprised almost three-fifths of Japan's exports.<sup>73</sup> Statistically speaking, textile manufacturing formed the mainstay of the industrial revolution in Japan, and female labour from rural areas constituted the backbone of the textile industry. As stated in Yasue Aoki Kidd's research on women workers in the Japanese cotton mills from 1880-1920, nearly eighty per cent of the workforce of the Japanese cotton spinning industry was female, and most of the female workers were recruited from the remote countryside where long and severe winters hampered farming activity.<sup>74</sup> In these regions, farmers lived in acute poverty, and this, combined with the labour surplus, represented an untapped natural resource that the cotton mills rushed to exploit. Around 1921, according to *Jokō Aishi (The Pitiful History of Women Mill Workers)*, by the textile worker and writer Hosoi Wakizō, more than sixty per cent of

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<sup>70</sup> Hauser, William B. "The Diffusion of Cotton Processing and Trade in The Kinai Region in Tokugawa Japan."

<sup>71</sup> Sung Jae Koh, *Stages of Industrial Development in Asia: A Comparative History of the Cotton Industry in Japan, India, China and Korea* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), p.66.

<sup>72</sup> All Japan Cotton Spinners' Association, p.15.

<sup>73</sup> William W. Lockwood, *The Economic Development of Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p.33.

<sup>74</sup> Yasue Aoki Kidd, *Women Workers in the Japanese Cotton Mills: 1880-1920*. Cornell University East Asia Papers, no.20 (New York: Cornell University, 1978), p.6.

textile workers had not finished their mandatory six years of education.<sup>75</sup> Young, unmarried women were the best choice for textile operators, because their labour was cheaper than men's, and these girls would have few family excuses to be absent from work.

During the Meiji Restoration in the late 1860s, the first group of large-scale private cotton-spinning companies were established, and the textile industry was one of the first industries to benefit from government assistance.<sup>76</sup> Along with the rapidly expanding market for cotton in southern Japan, suburban women in the north volunteered, or were forced, to leave their home towns and come to the cotton mills in the southern capital region. This led to a further shortage of labour in the already underdeveloped textile production industry in northern Japan. Fewer textiles could be manufactured locally, and as a consequence mending became an essential way of life in the remote villages. Understanding why farm women would be motivated to enter these mills requires an examination of general attitudes regarding appropriate behaviour for women in the Meiji period.

The recruiters hired by the mills would travel round the rural villages, showing the poor farmers, attractive pamphlets and brochures exaggerating the benefits of mill employment and convincing the farmers to send their daughters off to the big city to earn the promised high wages. Once a father had signed a contract committing his daughter to a three-to-five-year stint at a mill, the mill would pay the family a large cash loan in advance. The farmer would get cash on the spot, and the loan would be repaid by his daughter little by little out of her monthly wage.<sup>77</sup> In this case, no matter how miserable a life the girl had in the mill, she could not leave her job, even if she had heard by telegraph that her mother had died. In historian Barbara Molony's study of Japanese female mill workers, she identifies that the overwhelming majority of farm girls either remained industrial workers throughout their teenage years, and often even

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<sup>75</sup> Hosoi Wakizō, *Jokō Aishi (The Pitiful History of Women Mill Workers)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Classics, 1954), p. 252-257.

<sup>76</sup> Keizo Seki, *The Cotton Industry of Japan* (Tokyo: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 1956), p.15.

<sup>77</sup> Hosoi Wakizō.

after marriage to fellow industrial workers, or else retired at marriage to lead the life of urban working-class housewives, never returning to their home towns.<sup>78</sup> People were well aware of what would happen to these girls, yet they would still be sent to the mills – this was considered ‘filial piety’.<sup>79</sup> The following is a song sung by textile workers.

I am a girl from a poor family.  
They sold me to the factory when I was twelve.  
I wish I had wings and I could fly.  
I’d fly away from this dreadful valley.<sup>80</sup>

As late as 1935 cotton textiles accounted for 26.5 per cent of all Japanese exports, and 14.5 per cent of all industrial output.<sup>81</sup> Japanese studies scholar Penelope Francks points out that Japan’s textile industries in many respects were in many respects phenomenally successful in establishing themselves during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, but the working conditions of the factory labour force was not satisfactory.<sup>82</sup> This view of women’s employment, from their passive recruitment as short-term workers to their return home as dutiful daughters, has endured for a variety of reasons, including, of course, its resonance with stereotypical images of women in Japan. Their gender and youth made their identities more passive and vulnerable; however, these young women helped to shape significant aspects of modern Japanese life and the Japanese textile industry. The labour migration of these young unmarried women from the countryside to the urban mills had tremendous demographic and social implications: it fuelled Japan’s urbanisation and created a “patchwork” that permitted the social and economic integration of city and countryside in an era of rapid change. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari highlighted the correlation

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<sup>78</sup> Barbara Molony, “Activism among Women in the Taisho Cotton Textile Industry”, in: G.L. Bernstein (ed.), *Recreating Japanese Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 217-238 (p.224).

<sup>79</sup> Tatsuichi Horikiri, *The Stories Clothes Tell: Voices of Working-Class Japan*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p.95.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Keizo Seki, p.6.

<sup>82</sup> Penelope Francks, *Japanese Economic Development, Theory and Practice*. (London: Routledge, 1999), p.224.



between patchwork and nomadism: “patchwork, in conformity with migration, whose degree of affinity with nomadism it shares, is not only named after trajectories, but ‘represents’ trajectories, becomes inseparable from speed or movement in an open space.”<sup>83</sup> In sum, Meiji was a period of significant change in the composition, migration and consciousness of the female workforce in the cotton textile industry. An intensive development in a specific region will necessarily lead to side effects in other places. The patchwork pieces made of ragged cotton, from the metropolis to the villages, also record and reflect the result of the flow of female labour from the small towns to the big cities.

The initial reason for the field trip to Aomori was to find out whether it was in fact the real place of origin of *boro*. However, searching for *boro* in Aomori turned the question round to ask whether *boro* really existed as a type of repair technique, or whether it has been invented more recently as a cultural phenomenon. From the history of the hard times in the northern areas of Japan to the aesthetics born out of it and the changing of people’s lives through time, layers of information justify the attributing of a mending culture to Tōhoku. Unlike *sashiko* or *sakiori*, “*boro*” is more like a synonym, or a simple way to represent the Japanese patchwork and repair tradition in the twenty-first century. People are still exploring it from different angles. And looking back to the exhibition in Amuse Museum, it is worth rethinking the implications that the museum was trying to make, not only about Aomori or Tōhoku, but also about the nation, and about being Japanese.

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<sup>83</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.477.

## Shaping *Boro* into Japanese Ethnicity

In 2017, Amuse Museum held a special exhibition of *bodoko*, drawing on the local Aomori term “*bodo*” that has been described earlier in this chapter. This exhibition contained information on the poverty, the lives of the villagers and the ties between generations. In general, *bodoko* were used as sheets to lie on during the night over straw or dry leaves on the floor. And often these sheets were also used during childbirth as the sheet for a baby to be delivered on. Before going to bed, people would put a flat sheet underneath the *donja*. The exhibition focused mainly on the use of *bodoko* for the process of childbirth, as the exhibition title indicated: *Bodoko – the Life Cloth*.

To emphasise the theme of life, curator Kiyoshi Tatsumi chose red as the primary colour in the exhibition design. Picture frames were built to hold the flat *boro* or *bodoko* textiles, and these were painted in red, to express the theme of “hope of life”, as Tatsumi explained.<sup>84</sup> This was not the first time that exhibitors had displayed *boro* framed like a painting. In 2000, when the first *boro* exhibition was held in Ōsaka’s ABC Gallery, *boro* was also displayed as framed pictures, as will be explored in Chapter Three. Similar to the photo of the *donja* jacket with the father and daughter behind it, next to the *bodoko* there was a photo of a girl wrapped in a piece of sheet standing in the snow. It is like a portrait of the people who made it and used it. To create the scene of the original use of *bodoko*, the curator put some straw on the floor and spread the sheets on the straw, and visitors could touch or even lie down on the *bodoko*.

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<sup>84</sup> Kiyoshi Tatsumi. Interview by Leren Li. Beijing Institution of Fashion and Technology. 20 October 2020.



**Figure 28.** A piece of *bodoko* held by a red wooden frame  
 Photograph by Leren Li

In appearance, *bodoko* is similar to the futon covers in the permanent *boro* collection. What makes *bodoko* special and suitable for displaying as a separate exhibition? First of all, from the introductory text, there was a strong message which reminded the visitor of their family ties and cycles of birth and death. Also, this exhibition constantly emphasised a nostalgic sense of remembering the ancestors, as the text suggests:

[...] In Aomori prefecture, cloth sheets called *bodo* or *bodoko* are made by the technique of sewing many pieces of hemp and cotton clothes from the clothing once worn by the ancestors for generations and generations.... We as individuals do not stand on our own. We are here through our parents, grandparents, and all the ancestors that existed before us. We could easily trace back to more than 1,000 lives of our ancestors through the past 10 generations. *Bodoko* has always reminded us that we would not be standing here right now if even just one person had been missing from that family line.”<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> “Boro. The shining Boro: Bodoko, the Life Cloth”. Text Panel. In the exhibition *Boro* at Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.



**Figure 29.** Bodoko, collected from Aomori Prefecture  
Amuse Museum  
Photograph by Leren Li

The text clearly pointed out that these stories in the exhibition were set in Aomori prefecture, and the discourse constantly referred to the “ancestors” of the makers of *bodoko*. However, it also tried to ask the visitor to reflect on their own ancestors, to consider the lineage that the visitor came from and the people who came before them in their own families. In the earlier analysis of Tanaka’s collection, human care within the makers’ families was a key message. To offer visitors a closer understanding of the people of Aomori, the display of *bodoko* led visitors to connect with *boro* on the level of common humanity and in the context of Japan: the case of *bodoko* in Aomori also created another layer of meaning for *boro* as a construction of ethnicity and cultural belonging.

The notion of Japan as an imagined racial community, as Yoshino Kōsaku put it, was that of a “family-nation” or “family-state” (*kazoku kokka*) of divine origin, and the members of this family-nation were perceived as being related “by blood” to one another and ultimately

to the emperor.<sup>86</sup> Although this collective sense of “oneness” disappeared from the main ideological scenario after the country’s World War II defeat in 1945, Yoshino argued that in the subconscious of Japanese people the nation as imagined kinship remains alive and well, and this mentality is epitomised in the racial metaphor of “Japanese blood.”<sup>87</sup> “Japanese blood” is a socially invented “we-ness” rather than something that is genetically oriented. Amuse Museum used *bodoko* as a symbol to evoke the sense of Japanese identity by constructing emotive associations with “the ancestors”. As the exhibition claimed, *bodoko* “remembers sweat, blood, tears and birth fluids of all mothers throughout the generations, and receives unspoken blessings and messages such as ‘you are protected among the all-embracing descendants’ family bonds.”<sup>88</sup> Substituting for the idea of “Japanese blood”, the material flow of *bodoko* fabrics between the north and the south of Japan could trigger certain associations, especially for Japanese visitors, allowing them to imagine that *bodoko* might possibly contain some fragments that had once been worn by their ancestors.

The example of *bodoko* endows *boro* with the attributes of a textile of becoming. As Deleuze observes, “the supposed real world that would lie behind the flux of becoming is not a stable world of being, and all ‘beings’ are just relatively stable moments in a flow of becoming-life.”<sup>89</sup> Each person is a genealogical patch on his or her own family history, and childbirth is accompanied by infinite cycles of life and death. *Bodoko* is an analogue of this concept of becoming. The new-born baby delivered on the *bodoko* receives unspoken blessings: “you are and will never be alone, look at this *bodoko* that holds you, you are protected among the all-embracing descendant’s family bonds.” No matter how hard life was, *bodoko* stood for the full realization of a mother’s earnest wishes for a baby that was blessed into this world, and

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<sup>86</sup> Kōsaku Yoshino, “The Discourse on Blood and Racial Identity in Japan”, in Frank Dikötter, *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), pp.199-212 (p.201).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> “Boro. The shining Boro: Bodoko, the Life Cloth”. Text Panel. In exhibition “*Boro*” at the Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.125.

the prayers of silent hopes from all the ancestors who would welcome this baby's new arrival into the eternal lifeline of its proud family lineage.

Through *bokodo*, Amuse Museum created the image of *boro* with an ethnic identity shared by all Japanese people: it is not just about understanding people's life in Aomori, but also about reflecting on being Japanese. In Eicher and Sumberg's essay "World Fashion, Ethnic, and National Dress," they define ethnic dress as ensembles and modifications to the body that capture the past and the members of a group: the items of tradition that are worn and displayed to signify cultural heritage.<sup>90</sup> They argue that ethnic dress is "often a significant visible mark of ethnicity, used to communicate identity of a group or individual among interacting groups of people."<sup>91</sup> *Bodoko*, as well as *boro*, is used as a cultural symbol for the nation, although it was portrayed as belonging to a specific minority group in Aomori. The exhibition used evocative associations, in particular the mother and child relationship, to dissolve the boundaries that separate the outsiders from the insiders of Aomori, and to generate a sense of group cohesion.

Returning to the paragraph that begins this chapter, in the conversation I had with a local textile dealer he said that the "Japanese-ness" had been engraved into *boro*, so it is unnecessary to call it "Japanese *boro*". In the essay "*The Invention of Identity*", Michael Weiner pointed out the lack of conceptual distinction between cultural and "racial" categories in Japanese literature, and notes that the term *minzoku* is used as synonym for both ethnic and national.<sup>92</sup> Yoshino agreed that there is an overlap of racial, cultural and national categories in the Japanese perception of themselves. He notes that "They often use the convenient term *tan'itsu minzoku* to describe their homogeneity as a people, without specifying whether they

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<sup>90</sup> Joanne B Eicher and Barbara Sumberg. "World Fashion, Ethnic and National Dress", in: Joanne B. Eicher (ed.), *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time*, pp. 295-306 (p.299). (Oxford: Berg, 1995). Accessed June 03, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/9781847881342/DRESSETHN0020>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.301.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Weiner, "The Invention of Identity", in: Dikötter, *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, p.96.

are referring to their racial or cultural features. (*Tan'itsu* means 'one' or 'uni', and *minzoku* is a multivocal term reflecting the Japanese situation, meaning not only 'race' but 'ethnic community' and 'nation'.)<sup>93</sup> No matter whether these repaired indigo patchworks had originated in Aomori or anywhere else, Amuse Museum constructed "*boro*" as an ethnic dress for the nation, which enabled Japanese people to find cultural "we-ness" and offered the world a new form of Japanese culture.

Amuse Museum aimed to use *boro* to make a unique claim about Japan in the twenty-first century: it proudly reminded visitors that *boro* had been accepted globally, and its aesthetic adopted by the contemporary international fashion industry. Nevertheless, the museum also made a claim that "*boro* was the opposite of today's consumer culture."<sup>94</sup> Patchwork as a universal practice for textile repair has been exemplified in Chapter One, but Amuse Museum created a sense of difference between *boro* and patchwork from other cultures. This notion of a racially exclusive possession of a particular culture was explained by Yoshino as an "apt characterisation of the 'particularistic' cultural sentiment of the Japanese, who have long perceived themselves as being in a 'peripheral' relation to the 'central' civilisations of China and the West where the 'universal' norms exist".<sup>95</sup> Despite the sense of uniqueness and superiority that the Amuse Museum exhibitions might imply, this museum was the "birthplace" for conceptual "*boro*" in the twenty-first century, enabling people from all over the world to find out about a type of Japanese patchwork called *boro*. Narratives about people in Aomori could be extended to a wider discussion about Japanese culture and reflections on Japanese ethnicity.

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<sup>93</sup> Kōsaku Yoshino, p.205.

<sup>94</sup> "Boro. The shining Boro: Bodoko, the Life Cloth." Text Panel. In exhibition "*Boro*" at the Amuse Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Visited on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Kōsaku Yoshino, p.206.

## Conclusion

With the change in my reflection on *boro*, this chapter is based on my two visits to the display of Tanaka Chūzaburō's collection at Amuse Museum and a field trip to Aomori in between these. The structure of this chapter also reflects my research process: from learning and believing what I saw in Tokyo to challenging the stories, searching for evidence in *boro*'s alleged "birthplace", verifying and reassessing the way the collection was displayed at Amuse Museum.

In the first analysis of the curatorial design of the collection at Amuse Museum, I use the displayed objects and the way they were presented to summarise three messages that the exhibition tried to communicate to the audience. Situating the *boro*-making background in Aomori and the severe living conditions there, the fundamental values that *boro* was endowed with in the exhibition was human care and a fighting spirit for survival. To humanise the story, photographs of people wearing *boro* in snowy landscapes were hung next to the *boro* textiles. Also, to create a closer relationship between the audience and *boro*, the narratives on the text panels used first-person storytelling, and visitors were allowed to touch the textiles to feel their "authenticity" and "warmth".

In addition to the value of human care, functionality and the sense of design are the other two features of *boro* that the exhibition aimed to highlight. Tanaka's collecting story communicated both the ingenuity of the makers and a changed attitude towards the necessity, or otherwise, of mending in a contemporary context. In order to explain the design thinking of *boro* makers, I used three examples, a *donja* jacket for guest use, tiny red strips on women's garments and coin bags with irregular stitching lines that were carried out by girls for practice to show the different reasons for, and methods of, making *boro*.

Because of the large number of *boro* pieces displayed, the central location of the museum, and ten-year duration of the exhibition, Amuse Museum played an important role in



introducing *boro* to the world. However, the single source of the collection could mislead the audience to understand *boro* as an exclusive craft made in Aomori. Therefore, I planned a field trip to Aomori to identify the stories about *boro* that are told in *boro*'s "birthplace", and the relationship between *boro* and this region. Through visits to museums in Aomori I identified that these museums, instead of using the term "*boro*", were more specific in introducing repair techniques with different approaches and clear indications. Repaired textiles shown in the Aomori Prefectural Museum and the Aomori Museum of History aim to tell a regional history from various aspects rather than introducing one category of repaired work. Therefore, the presentations and interpretations of "*boro*" by Amuse Museum differs markedly from those in the museums in Aomori.

Regarding the regional history of Tōhoku, I discuss the creation of *boro* in relation to the natural disasters, cotton development and labour migration that caused poverty. The destruction and reconstruction of people's homeland has been a catalyst for socio-economic change in Tōhoku, and also a metaphorical notion that resonates with the care and hope embraced by *boro*. The shortage of cotton caused by the harsh climate has been noted in many existing texts to explain the creation of *boro*. However, my research, through a general history of cotton development in Japan, reveals that the practice of mending garments might not have been carried out simply because of the cold climate, as the hemp *boro* presented in this chapter proves that warmer regions in the south may also have used patchwork to reinforce garments, which further demonstrates the universality of "*boro*" practices within Japan. In addition, the loss of female labour to the developing cotton industry in southern Japan further weakened the already underdeveloped textile production industry in the northern areas. Built on these analyses, I went back to the Amuse Museum and reassessed the messages that the exhibition conveyed about *boro* and the notion of being Japanese.

I used the exhibition *Boro the Shining Cloth – Bodoko – the Life Cloth* as a case study of *boro* and Japanese ethnicity by exploring the reasons for displaying it as a separate exhibition. The display of this exhibition sent a strong message about family ties and life cycles to remind the audience of their own ancestors and lineage. It used *bodoko* and a visually impressive red-coloured setting to evoke the sense of Japan and Japanese identity. The separate display of *bodoko*, a special type of *boro* used for women to give birth on, triggers certain recognitions of cultural cohesion and the notion of “Japanese blood”. As patchwork, *boro* shares certain features with patchwork from other cultures. But Amuse Museum aimed to construct *boro* as a cultural symbol for the nation, one which had been accepted globally but which still made a unique claim about Japan.

In the next chapter, I will explore the process of the global acceptance of *boro* through international exhibitions and other related events. Following the diagram of the thesis structure, as I presented in the introductory chapter, *boro* is transformed through a global material flow from antiques markets to art and design spaces, returning as a wearable piece again through fashion. The next chapter is built on this structure, and I will discuss this transition from the first *boro* exhibition in Japan through a series of global *boro* exhibiting practices to the most recent *boro* show in New York, presented in parallel with the work of well-known Japanese avant-garde designers.

## Chapter Three

### Globalising *Boro* Exhibitions

Chapter One showed how *boro* can be understood beyond linguistic definitions. I extended the discussion of *boro* to its correlation with the general history of patchwork, appliqué and quilting in a transcultural context. In Chapter Two, I explored the way that *boro* has been conceptualised in Japan. Chapter Three will draw attention to the exhibiting of *boro* in Japan and elsewhere, to analyse the transcultural interpretations and multiple values being applied to *boro* through its global circulation. This chapter aims not only to document *boro* exhibitions around the world, but also to investigate how *boro* transcends its origins to art, design and fashion world, and how collections have been presented, prepared and consequently perceived. What does a real *boro* look like? How is *boro*'s authenticity defined under different contexts? Using image analysis and interviews, this chapter will investigate the ways that *boro* has been translated from flea market to the gallery space by *boro* makers, dealers, collectors and exhibitors, and explain how *boro*'s values and meanings are produced through being exported to the world.

Listed below, from 1994 to 2020, are the museum spaces in which *boro* has been circulated globally, and this chapter is grounded in these case studies:

Exhibition Name	Museum Name/Country	Year of the Exhibition
1. Riches from Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing	San Francisco Museum of Craft and Folk Art / USA	1994
2. Boro Afterglow – the Beauty of Boro	ABC Gallery / Japan	2000
3. Ragged Beauty: Repair and Reuse	San-Francisco Museum of Craft and Folk Art / USA	2004
4. Mottainai	Portland Japanese Garden / USA	2011
5. Boro: The Fabric of Life	Domaine de Boisbuchet / France	2013
6. Boro: Threads of Life	Somerset House / UK	2014
7. Boro: Threads of Life	MUDE: Museum of Design and Fashion/ Lisbon	2014
8. Boro: Tanaka Chuzaburo Collection	Amuse Museum / Japan	2009-2019
9. The Aesthetics of Boro	Kōbe Fashion Museum / Japan	2016
10. The Value of Design	Design Society / China	2018
11. Boro Textiles: Sustainable Aesthetics	Japan Society / USA	2020

These case studies offer a chronology of the history of *boro* exhibiting internationally, and also list the themes and locations of the exhibitions. They raise questions about the way *boro* has been displayed and interpreted in these museums and galleries, what the pieces look like, and what the connections are between these exhibitions. To contextualise this with the Amuse Museum exhibition in Chapter Two, this chapter begins with the first *boro* exhibition in Japan and discusses subsequent international exhibitions chronologically. Through these global curatorial experiments, new values and meanings have been produced within the contexts of folk crafts, art, design and fashion. This chapter will investigate how textile dealers and curators have shaped *boro* in different ways.

### **The First *Boro* Exhibition in Japan**

In November 2000, ABC Gallery, an art exhibition space located in Ōsaka's Tenōji neighbourhood, held the first ever *boro* exhibition in Japan, entitled *Boro Afterglow – the Beauty of Boro*. Featuring *boro* textiles collected by Nukata Kousaku, this exhibition displayed mostly textiles from the north east of Honshū Island and southern rural areas along the Sea of Japan. Nukata's huge collection of *boro* comprises utilitarian textiles that have been patched and repaired using cast-off cotton and hemp fabrics, and he chose fifty pieces, each of which he felt had a different atmosphere of their own to display in the ABC Gallery. The textiles were divided into two categories: many of them were futon covers (Figure 1), which consisted of padded sleeping mattresses (*shikibuton*), quilts (*kakebuton*), and floor blankets (*kotastugake*), and the rest were garments, including kimono and *haori* jackets (hip or thigh-length kimono-style jackets). In addition to items of daily wear, *boro* articles also included things such as *furoshiki* (wrapping cloths), and special hemp cloth bags for making soy sauce and rice wine (*sake*). Many of these *boro* had over a hundred small patches and reinforcements and used a

wide variety of indigo fabrics in various shades of blue (*ai*), stripes (*shima*), plaid (*koushi*), sometimes ikat (*kasuri*) and paste-resist print (*katazome*).<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Futon covers collected by Nukata Kousaku, shown at ABC Gallery  
Photograph courtesy of Morita Tadashi

As shown in the picture above, the exhibition had no textual information next to the objects, nor did the catalogue provide details about the provenance of the items. The catalogue mainly consists of Nukata’s personal reflections on his collecting experience and his reading of these textiles from an artist’s perspective. In addition to the aesthetics of *mottainai* and nostalgia that were discussed in previous chapters, Nukata referred to the term “primitive art” to describe his feeling about *boro*.<sup>2</sup> He felt that his painting practice was gradually moving away from figurative art, and he therefore started to look for things around him to help him with his future creations. As Nukata described, “you don’t know when or where you might

<sup>1</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “Japanese Boro: a New Way to See Beauty”, *VAV magazine*, 2016, p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Kousaku Nukata, *Boro no Bi: Ranru Zanshō (Beauty of Boro – Japanese Boro Textiles)*. (Ōsaka: Skattsei Publishing, 2000). Translated by Otsuka Aiko.

encounter what kind of thing. When you find it, you want to own it and treasure it as art. It's like an instinctual desire. It just happens outside your plan.<sup>3</sup>

Nukata believed that *boro* was no longer exclusive to Japan after seeing what he accidentally encountered on a trip to Ethiopia (date unknown). A piece of patchwork he acquired there was shown in the exhibition (Figure 2), with a story about how he exchanged his T-shirt for this piece.



**Figure 2.** A patchwork collected by Nukata Kousaku in Ethiopia.  
Photograph courtesy of Morita Tadashi

It was spring, and I was in a village. I found this patchwork cloth from a boy wearing it on his head. I ask the price from him. He wasn't sure how much he

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

should ask for. In the end, I picked the most expensive price from his offers, the boy looked very happy. I'm happy too. Now I have a "boro" from Ethiopia: this is a cross-country deal. At that night, around me was the nice, cool air from the hill, then I realised that the *boro* I had bought from the boy might be his blanket for sleeping. I spent a cold night without sleeping well.<sup>4</sup>

Nukata hung this Ethiopian "boro" at the beginning of this exhibition; as the photo shows, it was near the entrance. Unlike Tanaka Chūzaburō's approach in his exhibition, Nukata had realised the universality of "boro" and displayed the Ethiopian piece in parallel with the Japanese *boro*. This idea of the universal is the antithesis of Tanaka's ethnographic approach, and also ties in with the conditions of the international art market and the later acceptance of *boro*: nostalgia was still part of the intention in this exhibition. An article published in *Asahi Shimbun*, one of the national newspapers in Japan, quoted Nukata as saying: "I feel my mother's hands from these textiles. Every piece of textile embodies the aesthetic found in the simple and diligent Japanese daily life. I wish people to reflect on their own thoughts when looking at the exhibition."<sup>5</sup> Instead of using Japanese textiles and social history and other people's stories to create meanings and relevance for *boro* now, Nukata wrote about his childhood memory of seeing his mother doing *boro* to exemplify the expression of human care in pre-mass-production times.<sup>6</sup> And corresponding to the sense of design in *boro* that I discussed in Chapter Two, Nukata also made this point in the catalogue, suggesting that the work done by human beings must reflect the maker's sense of beauty: "this must be the creator's idea of what he or she wanted to say".<sup>7</sup> Throughout the book, Nukata uses a romantic

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<sup>4</sup> Nukata, *Beauty of Boro – Japanese Boro Textiles*.

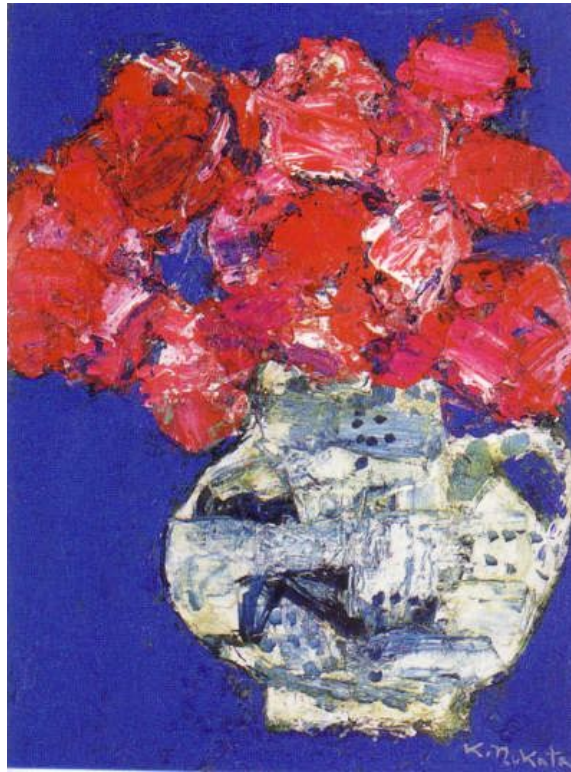
<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

tone – some pages are written in a poetic style, to express the fundamental meaning that he found in *boro* as a reminder for people to “be rich in mind, and be physically poor”.<sup>8</sup>

As a painter, Nukata also investigated *boro* from an artistic aspect, by questioning ways of reading *boro* as art. By displaying *boro* in frames and hanging *boro* like paintings on the wall, he suggested that his audience should look at *boro* as if they were reflecting on a painting. In the catalogue he also made an analogy between balancing hues in painting and arranging patches on *boro*. In his own work, he applied square-shaped layers and blue colour to mimic faded and distressed indigo (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** *Red Flower*. Artist: Kousaku Nukata  
Oil painting. (Date unknown)

Nukata’s artistic reproductions of *boro* can be compared with the work of Chinese artist Li Xiangming, which provides a different example of the influence of mending culture and rural hardship on visual art. Patches and distressed textiles acquired from Chinese villages were

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



often used in his paintings and installation works, as a remembrance and appreciation of ordinary people's life in the Chinese countryside. As Li notes, "[...] Patchwork makers didn't mean to build relationships between the patches and the fabrics, but the relations were constructed by the peasants' aesthetic awareness. I call it 'natural structuralism', which is the key term for this aesthetics of patchwork."<sup>9</sup> The term "natural structuralism" Li uses here doesn't indicate a particular movement in art history: he created this term to explain the message of his work; as he writes: "when you find the materials, you've created them at the same time".<sup>10</sup> Li believed that poor families only threw away these patched pieces because they had made the best use of the objects, and the patches left on the pieces are the result of a folk aesthetic. Relating to the *mottainai* aesthetics that I discussed in Chapter One, Li's statement reveals the neglected aesthetic value of so-called waste materials, and he suggests that the value was created when the materials were rediscovered. In Li's installation work *Writings of the Humble Life*, shown in Figure 4, the materials were all from discarded clothes and sacks that Li had acquired from people in villages, and he combined the fabrics with acrylic on board. When he found these patchworks, as he wrote, he saw their intrinsic value and believed that he did not need to exaggerate or embellish them further.<sup>11</sup> Li's work is not about creating things, it is about finding artistic elements and values from things in life and reassigning value to them.



**Figure 4.** *Writings of the Humble Life*. Xiangming Li. Mixed Media, 2011

<sup>9</sup> Xiangming Li. Su Wang (eds), *Buding Heyi Chengwei Yishu: Li Xiangming de Tuyu ji qi Pingming Meixue (How Can Patches Become Art? Xiangming Li and the Humble Aesthetics)*. (Beijing: New Star Press, 2016), p.22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

The examples of Nukata and Li's work, as well as the ways in which Nukata displayed *boro* in the gallery, all provide new visual and aesthetic experiences of reading *boro* from its creative aspects. By using Li's artwork, I also argue that the universal "*boro* experience" applies not only to *boro* collecting and exhibiting activities; it is also embraced by contemporary art in various forms and approaches.

To return to Nukata's *boro* exhibition at the ABC Gallery, the two-week exhibition did not leave much in the way of documentation, either, only a catalogue that sold out during the first few days. I borrowed the catalogue from the Mingei Gallery in Paris during my interview with the owner, Philippe Boudin. The pictures of the exhibition, as well as the newspaper report, were provided by Japanese collectors Morita Tadashi and his wife Morita Kazuko. The internet and social media were not so actively used and accessible to everyone at the time of this *boro* exhibition, as Morita Kazuko recalled: "Seeing *boro* being mounted on the wall in the gallery space was truly a shock to the public at that time. Some young Japanese didn't even know what *boro* was and why *boro* was created. And some people who expected to see art in the gallery were angry because they saw *boro* as disgraceful."

In her article about *boro*, textile researcher artist and curator Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada described other reactions from the public. She says that "schoolteachers returned with their students in tow, a young man stood silently and wept, women stayed in the gallery for hours, and both young and old returned again and again. Viewers were fascinated by the artful darns, patches, and reinforcements, and touched by the imprint of ancestral hands".<sup>12</sup> There is no actual evidence in her article that she visited the exhibition and saw people's reactions. In her writings about this first exhibition of *boro* in Japan, she notes that it was held in 2002; however, the original flyer that the Moritas obtained from the exhibition indicate that it was in 2000

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<sup>12</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, "*Boro no Bi: Beauty in Humility – Repaired Cotton Rags of Old Japan*", in: *Proceedings, Textile Society of America Symposium 2004*, 458 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004), p. 278, (available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/458/>), p.278.

(Figure 5). In terms of the details of Nukata’s collection, Wada’s information might be more relevant and reliable for another exhibition she curated for Nukata in 2004 at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco, which I will discuss in the next section.



Figure 5. “Boro Afterglow – the Beauty of Boro.” exhibition advertisement.  
Photograph courtesy of Morita Tadashi

### A Japanese Way of Repairing: Early *Boro* Exhibitions in America

In 2004, Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada borrowed eleven pieces of *boro* from Nukata Kousaku’s collection for the San Francisco Museum of Craft & Folk Art exhibition *Ragged Beauty: Repair and Reuse, Past and Present*. Coinciding with the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Textile Society of America in Oakland, California. It featured not only *boro*, but also contemporary artwork and folk art objects that collectively explored the theme of repair and reuse.<sup>13</sup>

The Museum of Craft & Folk Art in San Francisco (MOCFA) was founded in 1983 and was closed in 2012. It then merged with Craft and Folk Art Museum (CAFAM) in Los Angeles, which is now named Craft Contemporary. In 2018, I contacted Suzanne Isken, the executive

<sup>13</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “Japanese *boro*: a New Way to see Beauty”, p.32.

director of CAFAM, to ask for the museum archive related to the exhibitions. However, as Isken replied, their on-site museum records only date back to 2006. I tried unsuccessfully to contact Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada by email, so I was not able to track down images of the exhibition display.

Before Wada was appointed as curator of *Ragged Beauty*, since the 1990s she had spent most of her time teaching textiles in the United States: she set up the Slow Fibre Studio for introducing the art of Japanese textile craftsmanship such as the tie-dye technique *shibori* to the United States, curated exhibitions and international study tours and published books. Before the *boro* exhibition, Wada had curated *The Kimono Inspiration: Art and Art-to-Wear in America* in Washington D.C. (1996) and *Japanese Design: A Survey since the 1950s* in Philadelphia (1994). She was one of the first writers to publish articles about *boro* in English, and her research covers both the history and current development of *boro*. Wada described *boro* as something “quiet, but expressive, and rich with history,”<sup>14</sup> and she read *boro* as a “textile diary” of what was available and how it was woven and dyed and then recycled.<sup>15</sup> According to Wada, through this exhibition she aimed to lead the audience to the following questions: who pieced and patched the textile, stitching and darning it so carefully? And who was the recipient of such love and care? Who used the coverlet night after night and later passed it on to a younger generation?<sup>16</sup> In other words, she tried to encourage an appreciation of the act of mending, the menders and the mended objects.<sup>17</sup> From the museum report and later published articles, Wada analysed the external factors that created *boro*, including cotton cultivation, transportation and the development of regional folk textile traditions, and she also documented the measurements of the futon textiles. However, she wrote

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<sup>14</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “*Ragged Beauty: Repair and Reuse: Past and Present*”, *Museum of Craft and Folk Art: a Report*, 20:2 (2004), 3-9, available at: <https://yoshikowada.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/ragged-beauty-mcfa-report-yiw-essay.pdf>. Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “Japanese Boro: A New Way to See Beauty.”, p.32.

<sup>15</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “Japanese Boro: A New Way to See Beauty”, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “*Boro no Bi: Beauty in Humility – Repair Cotton Rags of Old Japan*”, p.282.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.281.

little about the repairers, and described *boro* as “a form of silent dialogue among family members”.<sup>18</sup> The unanswered questions left a lot to the imagination about the creation of *boro*, and the anonymity of the makers was in stark contrast to other artists whose work featured in the exhibition.

MOCFA marketed itself with the mission to “become clear about the role of craft and its relationship to folk art with contemporary society”,<sup>19</sup> to provoke viewers to reflect on past traditions and contemporary life and art creation, especially in the Western context. The exhibition involved five textile artists, who were British (Caroline Bartlett), Canadian (Dorothy Caldwell), Australian (Liz Williamson) and American (Angela Lim and Michael Swaine). These artists’ work all investigate brokenness and repair through different methods and media, and they also explore abstract ideas such as “memory, recovery, respect, dialogue, healing, and the cycle of creation”.<sup>20</sup> In addition to Nukata’s *boro* collection and contemporary artwork, *Ragged Beauty* also featured a small collection of repaired objects from different countries. For example, an Indian lacquered bowl was repaired with zigzags of metal lacing; a painted Russian teapot was held together with metal straps and a metal spout; a Japanese tea bowl was mended by the renowned Japanese potter Kitaoji Rosanjin.<sup>21</sup> This idea corresponded to Nukata’s Ethiopian patchwork in the previous exhibition, which expanded the idea of ragged beauty to a broader cultural context.

From Ōsaka to San Francisco, and also the Amuse Museum discussed in previous sections, the attempts made by *boro* enthusiasts and promoters to create modern aesthetic value for *boro* followed a similar route to that which Yanagi Sōetsu utilised in developing the *Mingei* movement. In her research on *mingei* theory and Japanese modernisation, Yuko Kikuchi summarised the projects that Yanagi initiated to reposition the *Mingei* movement into a modern

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.283.

<sup>19</sup> Kate Eilertsen, “Letter from Director”, *Museum of Craft and Folk Art: A Report*, 20:2 (2004), p.2.

<sup>20</sup> Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, “Ragged Beauty: Repair and Reuse, Past and Present”, p.6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.8.

system.<sup>22</sup> For example, he promoted a guild system for crafts makers, showcased idealised modern and *mingei* hybrid lifestyles through the “modern room” display, established the Japan Folk Crafts Museum (*Mingeikan*) in Tokyo and published the *Kōgei* (Crafts) magazine. As Kikuchi addresses, “*mingei* was constructed as authentic ‘tradition’, and at the same time it was also repositioned in the modern context to generate new aesthetic values.”<sup>23</sup> This cultural reinvention is also reflected in the transformation of *boro* that crossed the boundaries between trash/treasure, folk craft/art, and objects/aesthetics. Except for the growing number of exhibitions out of Japan, modern aesthetic changes also play an important role in the increasing commercial values of both *mingei* and *boro*. The following paragraphs provide an example of an exhibition of Japanese repaired textiles held in 1994 to show the huge value and attitude shifts toward *boro*.

*Ragged Beauty* is an example of an early international exhibition in which the curator referred to *boro* in the presentation of the objects. However, this was not the first show of Japanese recycled textiles outside Japan. as the brief outline in the introductory chapter indicates: in 1994, MOCFA organised the exhibition *Riches from Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*. This exhibition was curated by Japanese artist and textile researcher Yoshida Shinichirō, an expert on hemp textiles in Japan, and Dai Williams, a British academic whose cultural research began with his involvement in museums in the San Francisco Bay Area, focusing on Japanese Ainu culture and ethnography.

As the title indicates, the *Riches from Rags* exhibition focused mainly on the *sak-iori* textile, a durable fabric made by stripping discarded fabrics into stripes and re-weaving them into new fabrics. It was then made into kimono, jackets, obi and other forms of work clothing

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<sup>22</sup> Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p.62.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.76.

worn primarily by fishermen and farmers.<sup>24</sup> The techniques of patching and stitching, *yosegire* and *sashiko*, were also included in the exhibition as traditional textile mending techniques. In addition to cotton, the curator also addressed the use of other bast fibres used to produce cloth, such as hemp, kudzu, and wisteria, that were all important clues for reconstructing rural life in various parts of Japan. The curators further explored the material possibilities of *boro* and suggested that silk rags were also recycled from cities to the countryside; for this reason, they included a futon cover in the exhibition (Figure 6). The picture below is from the book of the same name published in association with the exhibition.



**Figure 6.** Futon in Silk.  
*Riches from Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing.*

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<sup>24</sup> Shinichirō Yoshida and Dai Williams, “Sakiori”, In *Riches from Rags: Sakiori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*. (San Francisco: San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1994), p.5.

Throughout the book, the curators refrained from using the term “*boro*” to describe the pieces; however, in a recent interview with curator Yoshida Shinichirō by *The Creative Independent* in 2018, when he was asked a general question about textiles he chose to answer by focusing on “*boro*”. He defined *boro* as “patchworks made by farmers using small remnants of silk.”<sup>25</sup> Yoshida didn’t talk much about cotton, although the information might have been lost in transcription, but this different material understanding of *boro* reminded me of another example I found in Kyoto when I was interviewing textile collector Kawasaki Kei, owner of Galley Kei in Kyoto. When I visited her, she showed me a silk *boro* that she kept in a hidden storage box (Figure 7), as its material did not match most buyers’ expectations of a collectible piece: most enthusiasts’ knowledge about *boro* is still closely related to cotton, which is how most exhibitions and collectors tell the story of *boro*. Once the narrative of poverty and the history of cotton production in northern Japan became dominant, collectors’ judgement about value followed a particular stereotyped version of *boro* in their imagination.



**Figure 7.** A piece of silk *boro* collected by Kei Kawasaki  
Photograph by Leren Li at Gallery Kei, Kyoto

<sup>25</sup> Shinichirō Yoshida. Interview by Ryu Takahashi and Brandon Stosuy, *The Creative Independent*, February 14, 2018, available at: <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/shinichiro-yoshida-on-being-guided-by-curiosity/> [Accessed 10/09/2019]



When Yoshida and Williams launched the exhibition and published the book, as Yoshida said, *boro* was still very cheap because most Japanese people were still throwing it away, so when the book was published, people didn't understand why these things were being presented as museum pieces.<sup>26</sup> However, the antiques and art market operates as a value-creating machine through shifting perceptions of things in order to transfer them into commercial goods. The *Riches from Rags* exhibition did not follow the current understanding of *boro*, not only because of the variety of materials that the curators chose to show, but also because the introduction about cotton history did not simply focus on its scarcity and later distribution in north-east Japan. For example, in the picture shown below (Figure 8), which I also used in the introductory chapter, is a *hanten* jacket (short winter coat) repaired by patching with the *sashiko* technique. In the description, it was assumed to have been made in Tottori prefecture, an important cotton-growing area near Kyoto.<sup>27</sup> This piece shows that even in a cotton-producing region people still needed to make their everyday clothing from scraps. In my conversation with *boro* dealers in the flea markets, I was told that in Aichi, Niigata and many prefectures in the south, people living in remote villages also reused cotton scraps just like those in northern Snow Country.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Shinichirō Yoshida and Dai Williams, "Sakiori.", p.56.



**Figure 8.** Sashiko Hanten.

*Riches from Rags: Sakiori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*

“Recently, the *boro* fabric that I had was sold for over \$10,000 in Paris. I wasn’t even able to sell it for \$10 in Japan back then,” Yoshida observed in comparing the huge change in the value of *boro* in the past twenty or more years.<sup>28</sup> In relation to this, Yoshida mentioned an Italian who picked up Yoshida’s book and then published another book about *boro*, which marked the beginning of *boro*’s global expansion. In the next section, I will discuss my interview with this Italian textile collector, David Sorgato, and his book *Boro*, published in 2004. Yoshida also talked about how Japanese and international fashion designers started to look for inspiration from his *boro* collection, and the designer he mentioned, Nakamura Hiroki, from Visvim, will be discussed in Chapter Four.

In this section, I have discussed two early exhibitions that brought the idea of *boro* and Japanese repaired textiles to the United States and spread them further to Europe. However, these two exhibitions investigated the rags within different contexts. Yoshida and Williams focused specifically on Japanese repaired textiles in a variety of forms, while Wada promoted the idea of “*boro*” with other mended objects and contemporary artworks from different

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

cultures to highlight the universal theme of repair. Although “*boro*” wasn’t emphasised in the 1994 exhibition, the idea had attracted attention from collectors in the United States and Europe, and the next sections will explore the shifting perceptions of *boro* through the international antiques and art market.

### **Transcending its Origins: The Commodified *Boro***

This section will introduce two textile dealers who brought *boro* from America to Europe, David Sorgato and Philippe Boudin. In Europe, *boro* exhibitions were mainly held by private galleries in their own spaces or hired museum spaces. As the Italian antique textiles dealer David Sorgato recalls, the first time he saw *boro* was at the Tribal Art Fair in San Francisco in around 2002.<sup>29</sup> He immediately decided to acquire several pieces and to organise an exhibition of these *boro* textiles. However, his Japanese partner, whom Sorgato described as a lady born into a privileged family in Japan, had mixed feelings about *boro*.<sup>30</sup> For his Japanese partner, it was still difficult to consider *boro* as art, even though it had already been shown in galleries outside Japan, and at the ABC Gallery in Ōsaka. With the help of two Japanese scholars, in 2004 Sorgato assembled fifty pieces of *boro* in his gallery in Milan. In this exhibition, entitled *Boro*, Sorgato found eager buyers among Milanese textile and tribal art collectors – a market that he claims “was a big success and still is”.<sup>31</sup> Prices of *boro* ranged from €3,500 to €7,000, depending on size and quality, and twenty-four pieces were sold during the exhibition.

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<sup>29</sup> David Sorgato, interviewed by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Milan, David Sorgato Gallery. April 11, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> The partner’s identity has been kept anonymous at the interviewee’s request, for personal reasons.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Szczepanek, “Riches from Rags, Boro Textiles from Japan”, *Hali: the International Journal of Oriental Carpets and Textiles*, 158, p.47.



**Figure 9.** *Boro* collection in David Sorgato's gallery.  
Photograph by Leren Li

Along with the exhibition, Sorgato published a 95-page catalogue to document the full collection. The *boro* items presented in the catalogue are mostly futon covers. According to Sorgato, American and European dealers' interest in *boro* was primarily in futon covers, which he suggested are the most interesting to his clients because the rectilinear, two-dimensional format makes them similar to conventional artworks such as paintings.<sup>32</sup> David Sorgato, as well as Douglas Dawson (a gallerist in Chicago) and Philippe Boudin (owner of Mingei Gallery in Paris), all favour mounting *boro* futon covers on a fixed frame, which provides rigidity and also presents the piece more in the manner of "fine art". In 2007, *boro* futon covers appeared at Sotheby's in London, where a large futon cover was sold for £2640 (Figure 10).<sup>33</sup> In his book, Sorgato refers to artists such as Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg to emphasise the visual connections between *boro* and modern art.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Textiles from the Collection of Alistair McAlpine. *Sotheby's auction catalogue* (2006), available at: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2006/textiles-from-the-collection-of-alistair-mcalpine-w06756/lot.173.html?locale=en> [Accessed 17 March 2020]

<sup>34</sup> David Sorgato, *Boro* (Milan: Maphalda edizioni, 2004), p.19.



**Figure 10.** An indigo boro futon, c. 1920, Japan  
 from the Alistair McAlpine Collection  
 Size: 172cm by 144cm  
 Material: Cotton  
 Estimate £800 - £1,200  
 Sold for £2,640

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, *boro* textiles seemed to be the sole domain of galleries and private dealers; museums had yet to acquire significant pieces. During this period, a large number of *boro* textiles were acquired by foreign collectors, and *boro* pieces with the desired quality of being heavily mended were getting harder to find in Japan.<sup>35</sup> As Tokyo-based textile dealer Morita Tadashi noted, in order to source fine pieces “I have to keep my eyes open every day at markets and textile auctions, and I need to maintain strong contact with dealers from the countryside.”<sup>36</sup> Sorgato witnessed *boro* market prices rising over and over again, and after the exhibition in 2004 he hardly purchased any new pieces, mainly

<sup>35</sup> Szczephanek, “Riches from Rags, Boro Textiles from Japan”.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

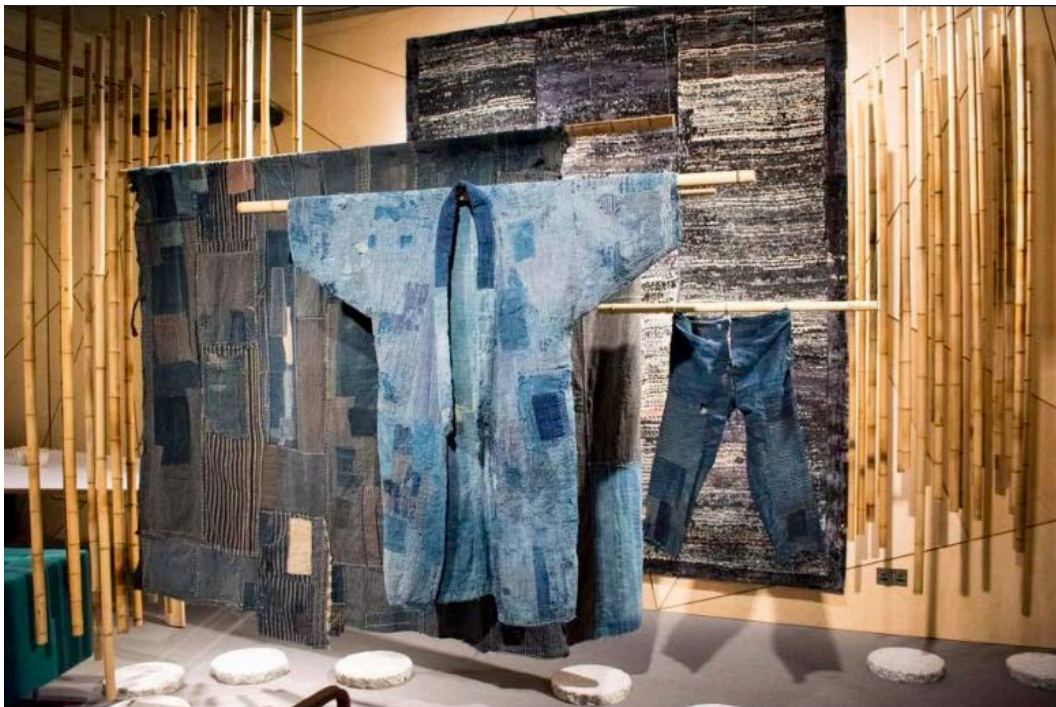
because of their soaring price. Sorgato was a very early participant in the *boro* world; however, the overpriced *boro* market, with its impetuous collectors, has made him gradually step away as a *boro* dealer. Sorgato's collecting specialism is antique oriental rugs and textiles; therefore, his *boro* collection is moving towards the work of contemporary textile artists whose practice embraces the aesthetics of *boro*, such as rug designer Jan Kath. According to Sorgato, Kath's *boro* rug collection was inspired by his vintage *boro* fabrics.



**Figure 11.** Boro 20. Designed by Jan Kath. Photograph by FRONT rug store.

In March 2018, I was invited to join the panel discussion at Jan Kath's *boro* rug collection launch event at FRONT rug store in London, co-organised with *Disegno* magazine. There were four speakers in the "Learning from *Boro*" panel, including artist Morag Myerscough, Seetal Solanki, founder and director of the material research design studio Ma-tt-er, myself and the designer Jan Kath, who was absent that day. The organiser suggested we

share our experiences of “*boro*” in relation to our own fields. As an artist whose work features geometric work in bold colours, Morag Myerscough talked about how she read Japanese *boro* through the lens of contemporary art. I shared my research about *boro*’s history and the spirit of repair embraced by the materials. Seetal Solanki then discussed how recycling and reconsidering the relationship between materials and human beings matters today. FRONT organised an exhibition of Jan Kath’s work from 15 March to 15 April 2018. As Figure 12 shows, Kath’s *boro* rug was mounted on the wall, and hung in front of the rug were his vintage *boro* textiles and a pair of patched jeans.



**Figure 12.** Boro rug designed by Jan Kath displayed in juxtaposition to a vintage *boro* futon, a kimono jacket and a pair of patched denim. Photograph provided by FRONT.

The price of Kath’s *boro* rugs varies depending on their customised sizes, shapes and colours; the piece of the piece shown above, according to FRONT’s staff, was around £2,000. During the event, audience were invited to join the exhibition and panel discussion, and through conversations and observations, I received some feedback from the participants. The audience were mostly former clients of FRONT and *boro* enthusiasts who had found the event through social media. In general, people were impressed by the vintage textiles, and asked me a lot

about my research. In terms of Kath's *boro* rug, people found its "*boro*-ness" was vague, and the most controversial discussions I had when members of the audience discerned a sense of mis-appropriation in Kath's design. Apart from their appearance, that mimicked *boro* visually, people found it hard to relate these luxurious rugs made of hand-spun highland wool and silk, sold in a Mayfair boutique rug shop, to repaired *boro* textiles, especially after hearing about *boro*'s history and the discussion of recycling design work. To quote one member of the audience: "For that much money, I'll go for a real *boro* and hang it in my living room".<sup>37</sup> This example of Kath's *boro* rug, and also David Sorgato's step back from his role as a *boro* dealer, is evidence of a transformation of *boro* from a folk craft to a commodified cultural product. This commodification process is also reflected in the curatorial practice of showing *boro* in museum and gallery spaces. Next, I will discuss the exhibition at London's Somerset House to discuss how *boro* is displayed as marketable works of art in a gallery space.

The catalogue from the exhibition *Boro: Threads of Life*, at Somerset House describe it as "A stunning collection of rare Japanese indigo patched textiles which appear to transcend their origins to become exquisite objects of abstract art."<sup>38</sup> This exhibition was the first to totally divorce *boro* from its folk origins in the way it was displayed. In April 2014, 40 pieces of *boro* textiles were shown in the East Wing galleries of Somerset House. These pieces were from the collection of Paris-based art collector Philippe Boudin, the owner of Mingei Gallery. Unlike the earlier ones, this exhibition drew little attention to the historical background and craftsmanship of *boro*. The first noticeable element of the setting of the exhibition was the way the objects were displayed. The curators did not give the pieces titles, leaving space for the viewers to create their own imagined theme. Presented thus as decorative artwork, most of the textiles had been meticulously cleaned, stitched down and framed in rectangles. Boudin

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<sup>37</sup> Quote from Jason Leung, a UK-based stylist. At FRONT rug store, London, 14 March 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Andy Christian, Exhibition textual information, *Boro: Threads of Life*, Somerset House, London, April 2014.



decided to hang all the textiles on the wall in this sophisticated gallery, just as paintings would be displayed. Like Sorgato, Boudin also created a juxtaposition between *boro* and the work of artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the catalogue.<sup>39</sup> This sent a message to the audience that the appreciation of the aesthetics of *boro* could be prompted by the work of artists outside the Japanese cultural context who had, through their own work, opened our eyes to the beauty and expressive qualities of these discarded materials. The frayed and tattered edges and the torn and threadbare textures of the *boro* futon covers were tamed and framed to become “pictures” (Figure 13). *Boro* had not been held in such high esteem before this show, and this event caused significant growth in the market price of *boro*.

Can art transcend function? This is the overarching question raised by the exhibition, and it also provides an insight into the hierarchy of the arts. In other words, this question implies the purpose of the exhibition: transforming the functional craftwork into art through changes in space and context. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker point out that the crucial factor that distinguishes art from craft is “spotlighting the finished object in isolation as a valuable commodity and by dissociating them (craft) from the means of their production.”<sup>40</sup> Pollock and Parker use the American quilts exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Modern Art in New York, as Chapter One discussed, to explain the reevaluation process of the quilts from domestic “women’s work” to utilitarian art form. They argue that “the role of the maker has had to be reduced and the processes of production either sentimentalised or suppressed entirely because their connections with the traditional notions of craft might get in the way of an interpretation of quilts as art.”<sup>41</sup> In Somerset House, the *boro* futons were hung on the wall as decorative art. Unlike other *boro* collectors who separated exhibitions from their business, Boudin and his curatorial partner Gordon Reece planned the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, “Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts,” in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1981), p.75.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

event as a twenty-five-day selling exhibition with free admission. One third of the textiles on display sold during the show at prices from £5,000 upwards, and the rest were sold online after the show.<sup>42</sup> According to Boudin, around 6,500 visitors came to this exhibition; the buyers were mostly artists and designers, and included the fashion designers Paul Smith, who visited the exhibition, and John Galliano, who was also a collector of *boro*.<sup>43</sup> Boudin therefore believed that the London exhibition would bring inspiration to many designers, helping to popularise *boro* in the fields of both fashion and art.



**Figure 13.** *Boro* exhibition at Somerset House, London  
Photo courtesy of Philippe Boudin

What made the show controversial, however, was how much these textiles looked like contemporary art, like abstract paintings, when they were in fact simple blankets and jackets: clearly nothing more than a practical endeavour, and utterly utilitarian. In curator Nicolas Trembley's review of the exhibition, he noticed that the more repair on the *boro*, and the older

<sup>42</sup> Philippe Boudin, interviewed by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Paris, Mingei Gallery, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

it was, the more valuable the textile was, as people typically believe the Japanese approach to beauty is in imperfection.<sup>44</sup> In my second visit to his gallery, Boudin showed me his current *boro* collection. Here I use two examples to explain the difference between a valuable piece and an ordinary piece from this collector's perspective.

The *boro* futon shown in Figure 14 was sold for 900 euros. The other *boro* futon, that Boudin suggested hanging on a wall for the photo rather than placing on the floor, is one of the most precious *boro* pieces in his collection (Figure 15). Boudin did not name a price for this piece, and he wrote down "Morita" on the tag, to remind himself that this piece was from Tadashi Morita, the textile dealer in Tokyo mentioned in the first section of this chapter. Boudin told me that he had not specified prices for those he had purchased from Morita-san, but that every piece from Morita's collection would be worth no less than 2,000 euro. This is first because of the stereotypical view of *boro*. Secondly, in this specific case of Morita's collection, Boudin said that he felt that *boro* collected by Morita had a guaranteed high quality.<sup>45</sup> In my interview with another *boro* collector, Amy Katoh, which I will discuss in Chapter Four, she describes Tadashi Morita as "king of the *boro* world", and for this reason some collectors will bring recently acquired *boro* pieces to him for quality inspection, or simply commission him to source *boro* textiles. Philippe Boudin became one of Tadashi Morita's international clients, because he believed Tadashi could help him find what he called "real *boro*".

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<sup>44</sup> Nicolas Trembley, "Tired, Tattered and Emotional", *Modern Design Review*, 2 (Spring/Summer 2015), p.45.

<sup>45</sup> Philippe Boudin, interviewed by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Paris, Mingei Gallery, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017.



**Figure 14.** *Boro* futon. Dated to Taisho Period (1912-1926) by the gallery owner. Collected by Mingei Gallery. Photograph by Leren Li



**Figure 15.** *Boro* futon. Collected by Mingei Gallery. Photograph by Leren Li

Boudin's classification of "real *boro*" and "fake *boro*" raised another debate about the authenticity of *boro*. According to Boudin, there has been a rapid decline in the amount of "real"

*boro* in Japanese flea markets. How this “realness” is defined varies, both in Japanese culture and in the collectors’ mindset. For collectors like Philippe, “real” *boro* indicates that the original fabric or garment was made during the late nineteenth or eighteenth centuries, and from the patches to the threads the materials should all have been produced at least several decades ago. No recent adjustments are allowed to be made on the fabrics, because this results in an unnatural “vintage” look that will cancel out the quality of the “antiqueness”.<sup>46</sup> But for many Japanese people, *boro* is simply a result of their daily mending practices: whether the patch was added in the Edo period, ten years ago or yesterday, it is all *boro*. Collectors may think some local *boro* makers cheat, by selling “fake” *boro* that they have made themselves. However, as Boudin reminded me, during his stay with a *boro* dealer in a village near Biwa Lake “the lady showed me a piece of *boro*, and I knew it was a fake one, yet I still bought it. She told me how she made the “fake *boro*”, and I found it interesting, because, for Japanese people, they don’t think it’s cheating. Otherwise, they won’t tell me how they make it.”<sup>47</sup> In short, local Japanese interpret the essence of *boro* as a genuine act of sewing and mending; its value might change with its age and origin, but its authenticity does not.

In order to observe how people sell *boro*, and who is buying *boro*, in December 2017 I visited Tokyo Boroichi Market, located in Setagaya borough. This bi-annual flea market only opens on two days in December and two days in January every year. Boroichi is the street name, with no connections with *boro*. Vendors come to Boroichi street selling antiques, second-hand goods and food. Following Boudin’s guidelines, I found what he called the “fake *boro*”, seen in the photos below. Figure 16 is a *boro* blanket sewn by machine: it is a 150cm by 150cm square (half is shown in the photo). When my translator told the stallholder, Hayashi Hirokuyi, that I was looking for *boro*, he showed me this piece, and asked 180,000 yen for it (around

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<sup>46</sup> Philippe Boudin, interviewed by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Paris, Mingei Gallery, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

£1,350). He told me that his wife had made it using fabrics bought from different flea markets, and tried to persuade me by saying that this machine-made piece would be more durable than a hand-made one.<sup>48</sup> According to Philippe Boudin's collecting guidelines, this machine-made *boro* would be considered fake, while the second piece would better exemplify the idea of the genuine sewing of *boro*. The second wall hanging (Figure 17) was 218 cm by 230 cm and weighed around 7.5 kilograms: this sold for 650,000 yen (around £4,875). It was claimed that the piece was made entirely from collected scraps of discarded fabrics and hand-sewn together, which took the maker a year to finish.<sup>49</sup> Looking closer at its details, it's clear to see the frayed edges and the condensed stitching. The makers did not try to mimic vintage *boro*, because they considered newly made *boro* was also valuable.

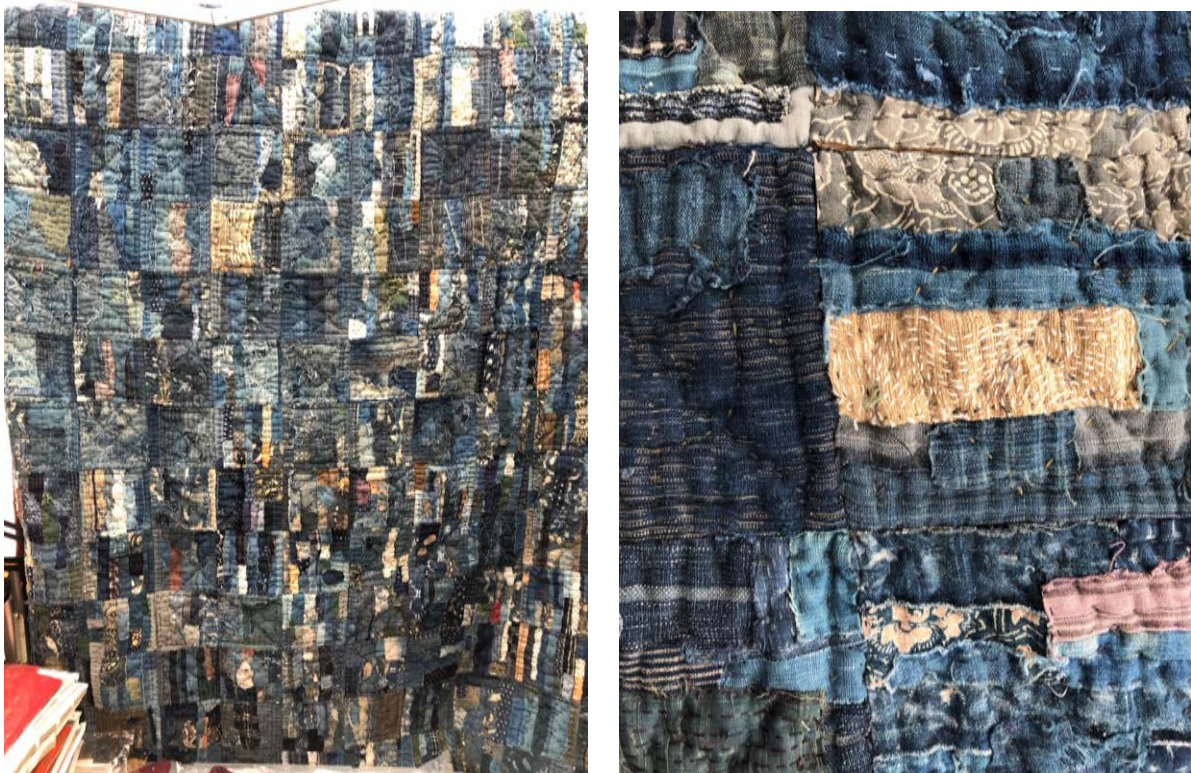


**Figure 16.** Machine-sewn *boro* blanket.  
Photograph by Leren Li at Boroichi Market.

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<sup>48</sup> Hayashi Hirokuyi, personal communication, 15<sup>th</sup> December. (2017) Boroichi Market, Tokyo. Translated by Iwata Yumika.

<sup>49</sup> Personal communication, 15<sup>th</sup> December. (2017) Boroichi Market, Tokyo. Translated by Iwata Yumika.



**Figure 17.** *Boro* wall hanging with the details of the surface.  
Photograph by Leren Li at Boroichi Market.

From a collector's point of view, the authenticity of *boro* relies on time. The existence of a "real" *boro* made decades ago is a recognition of the regional culture and proof of a specific period of history. Acquiring an ancient *boro* means possessing authentic culture: as Yoshida said, "there is no meaning to work without the context of my 'roots'".<sup>50</sup> In other words, what *boro* represents is the culture or aesthetics that is specific to its possessors, independent and different from other cultures. But for many Japanese, doing *boro* is not only about selling to collectors, because *boro* never dies out in their lives.

In December 2018, during my second visit to Japan, I went to the Ōedo Antique Market in Tokyo, and had a short conversation with a vendor Shigeno-san (Figure 18). His vintage *boro* textiles had mostly been sourced from his home town in Aichi prefecture. Indeed, foreign visitors were very interested in these fabrics, as Shigeno-san said, which is a reason for him

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<sup>50</sup> Shinichirō Yoshida. Interview by Ryu Takahashi and Brandon Stosuy, *The Creative Independent*, February 14, 2018, available at: <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/shinichiro-yoshida-on-being-guided-by-curiosity/> [Accessed 10/09/2019]

travelling to Tokyo to sell his *boro*. But local Japanese, especially older women, were still his major customers. They bought the *boro* cloth mainly for functional purposes, such as using it as a *furoshiki* (wrapping cloth) or remaking it into new garments. Because the used cotton fabrics were very soft, some older people preferred to wear clothes made from these fabrics.<sup>51</sup> For people who couldn't afford a large piece, Shigeno-san prepared a box of cotton scraps sold in bundles (figure 19). The price for each bundle was the equivalent of about £11, so people could have the option of making their own *boro*. As more visitors have been coming to Japan for “*boro*”, some dealers are becoming aware of the commercial value of these garments made of rags. It is common to see dealers selling *boro* for the equivalent of a thousand pounds in flea markets, including both ancient pieces, which Boudin considered “real *boro*”, and also recently made pieces, the so-called “fake *boro*”.



**Figure 18.** Shigeno-san, a *boro* dealer from Aichi prefecture.  
Photo by Leren Li

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<sup>51</sup> Shigeno-san, personal communication, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018. Oeno Antique Market, Tokyo.





**Figure 19.** Cotton scraps sold in bundles.  
Photo by Leren Li

Returning to the exhibition in Somerset House, exhibiting *boro* in a museum space ascribes to it an authentic value. As anthropologist Richard Handler reminds us, “in modern society, the temple of authenticity is the museum, where we display the objects or pieces of culture that stand for the cultures of their processors-creators”.<sup>52</sup> However, how collectors position themselves will significantly influence the authenticity and market value of their *boro* collections. Tanaka Chūzaburō was a collector, but he was also an ethnographer, who acquired and collected the objects and also documented the stories of his collection. Philippe Boudin is very sensitive to the *boro* market, so he has acquired some very high-quality *boro* pieces that he knows will be favoured by the art market. The Kyoto-based textile dealer Kawasaki Kei, however, insists that knowing the material history is more important than hanging a piece at home.<sup>53</sup> Some pieces in her gallery are not for sale because of her deep emotional attachment to the textiles. Kawasaki curates small exhibitions to spread knowledge about textile history in Japan, and she is the first and only collector whose *boro* has been acquired by the Victoria and

<sup>52</sup> Richard Handler, "Authenticity", *Anthropology Today* 2: 1 (1986), p.2-4. doi:10.2307/3032899.

<sup>53</sup> Kei Kawasaki, interviewed by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Kyoto, Gallery Kei. December 22th, 2017.

Albert Museum in London (Figure 20). In my interview with Anna Jackson, keeper of the Asian Department at the V&A, she described her team's consideration of the following questions: "what the *boro* robe might tell us about design, material, techniques as well as the socio-cultural, political and economic context in which it was produced and consumed; how does the object resonate with our existing collections; is it an object that we can display, and / or would be used as a resource to our visitors and researchers; is it in good or at least reasonable condition; does it represent value for money?"<sup>54</sup> This answer demonstrates the suitability of *boro* from a museum curator's perspective. This piece is currently displayed in the exhibition *Values of Design* hosted by Design Society in Shekou, China, and it will be discussed further later in this chapter.



**Figure 20.** Robe. Date: 1850-1900.  
Collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum.  
Museum number: FE.27-2015.

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<sup>54</sup> Anna Jackson, email to Leren Li, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

Compared to Boudin's pursuit of "authenticity", the female curators' attention tends to be more towards stories behind *boro*. Kawasaki Kei in particular has noticed the losing sight of women in exhibitions of so-called feminine work made by countryside housewives. In *Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker claimed that embroidery was employed as a fine art medium because of its "association with femininity and nature".<sup>55</sup> However, when *boro* was displayed as art in a gallery space, the feminine qualities of care and labour values were lost. The female *boro* makers were simply portrayed as hardworking housewives sacrificing for their families. These *boro* makers shared a unified identity, and none of their names was recorded. As Parker discussed the stereotypical feminine construction in art field, writing: "when women paint their work is categorised as homogeneously feminine – but it is acknowledged to be art. When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorised as craft."<sup>56</sup> In the case of *boro*, the lack of historical evidence is one reason, but the gender of the dominant participants of the *Boro* art market also decides the narratives of *boro*. Thinking of the ways that male collectors and gallerists like Philippe Boudin and David Sorgato promote *Boro*, they normally put the textile in juxtaposition with Western artists such as Robert Rauschenberg or Piet Mondrian. Indeed, abstract expressionism provides a unique way of understanding *boro*, elevating it into the high art field. At the same time, it also raises the concern about how the phallogentric and Western art world shapes a feminine craft like *boro*. In many cultures, when women had little public voice, making quilts, patchwork and embroideries was a way to record life and express themselves.<sup>57</sup> And exhibitions provide space to speak up through craftwork, such as the 2010 exhibition *Handmade Tales: Women and Domestic Craft* curated by Carol Tulloch in The Women's Library in London, and

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<sup>55</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), p.191.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p.4.

<sup>57</sup> Peter S. Hawkins, "Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilts," Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne Ed. *Thinking about Exhibition*. (London: Routledge, 1996), p.133-156.

“Feministo: Women and Work” held by the South London Art Gallery in 1975. It’s about “an escape from the monotony of daily life, connecting with other women and other artist, and about challenging the boundaries of the art world.”<sup>58</sup> However, sometimes when textile crafts were moved into art space and endowed with much greater artistic, economic, and social values, the makers’ voices became even more absent, such as the *boro* exhibition in London Somerset House. When *boro* is appreciated as decorative wall hangings or abstract “textile painting” rather than as a folkcraft within its cultural context, its original language is also suppressed or lost.

Some business strategies on promoting *boro* are designed to be a relatively straightforward and linear process: the textiles dealers work hard to “transform” *boro* directly from humble folk crafts to art pieces displayed in the art space. The alchemy of high art provides a shortcut to increase the market value of *boro*. As a collectable investment, the aesthetical criterion of *boro* will be easily standardised. Therefore, it raises concerns about who has the power of value manipulation and whose voice is neglected. In the writing about the controversial quilt exhibition organised by Holstein in Whitney Museum of American Art (as Chapter One discussed), Karin E. Peterson argues that the differentiation between art and non-art reflects a hierarchy of value supported by “the mechanism of the modern eye”.<sup>59</sup> According to Peterson, the modern eye seems neutral, but it still has limitations due to the human cultural production. No matter whether it is craftwork or artwork, multiple readings should be allowed. In the current *boro* market, different views and narratives from male and female dealers reflect the power relations through the hierarchy of value. The contribution made by the male textile dealers and curators to promote *boro* globally is undeniable, but it shouldn’t be separated from

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<sup>58</sup> Kirsty Robertson, “Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches: Writing a Craftivist History,” in Maria Elena Buszek ed, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.184.

<sup>59</sup> Karin E. Peterson, “How the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary: The Modern Eye and the Quilt as Art Form,” in Maria Elena Buszek ed, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.99-114.

the other values created by female participants. It is apparent that women narrators of *boro* like Kawasaki Kei, in their curating and writing, are more dedicated to recovering the stories and material histories that have been missing. Their work documenting the past is a resource in the present, which helps many other *boro* makers to reconfigure Japan's repair history to make it relevant to today, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

This section began by discussing the work of an early textile collector, David Sorgato, who started promoting *boro* in Europe in 2004 and later left the market because of the soaring prices for *boro*. I then discussed recent work by rug designer Jan Kath, noting my own experience as a participant in his collection launch event. The commodification of *boro* has become a phenomenon since 2010, and the 2014 selling exhibition in Somerset House London marked the transition of *boro* from antiques market to art world. Following the idea of selling *boro* as art, I discussed different understandings of the authenticity of *boro* by a foreign textile collector and vendors selling *boro* in flea markets in Japan. On one hand, European galleries played an important role in the commodification of *boro* in the art market. On the other, there have been many experimental *boro* exhibitions in Europe, and I will focus on some of these in the next section.

### **Transforming *Boro* into a Design Context: Curatorial Experiments**

In last section, I discussed the introduction of *boro* in the art world and the attempts that designers have made to recreate *boro* as decorative products. In this section, I will explore exhibitions that have attempted to introduce *boro* into the field of design. I will focus on the hosting of a touring exhibition of *boro* in different settings to describe the different curatorial processes.

Influenced by the early exhibitions of *boro* in the United States, American textile gallerists started collecting *boro* and exploring new possibilities for displaying their *boro* collection. Shari Cavin, who ran a New York-based tribal art space, recalled seeing her first *boro* textile, “When I saw my first *boro*, imagine [Bernini’s] *Ecstasy of St Teresa*: it was the simultaneous tie to Japanese culture and to contemporary abstraction that had me swooning.”<sup>60</sup> Stephen Szczepanek was also one of the early *boro* collectors in America. He set up the Sri gallery in 2003, having spent years writing about antique Japanese textiles and hosting exhibitions around the world, most of which were in European countries. This section will cover two exhibitions he organised in France and Portugal.

In June 2013, *boro* travelled to Lessac, France, to the Domaine de Boisbuchet, a country estate in the south west of France renowned as an international centre for experimentation in design and architecture, where Stephen Szczepanek and Mathias Schwartz-Clauss, director of Domaine de Boisbuchet, curated the exhibition *Boro: The Fabric of Life*.

As described in the introductory video posted on the Domaine de Boisbuchet’s website, the founder of this organisation, Alexander von Vegesack, bought the Domaine de Boisbuchet in 1986 and built it into an educational organisation – the Centre international de recherche et d’éducation culturel et agricole (CIRECA) – for summer workshops and exhibitions in various fields. As von Vegesack said, “it’s not important to be an expert in something, but just to have an idea and to try, to make it happen”.<sup>61</sup> “Design, architecture and nature” are the key themes of Boisbuchet.<sup>62</sup> Among the new buildings and pavilions in Boisbuchet’s architectural park is its château in the centre, which was built in 1864, where the *boro* exhibition was held.

The exhibition featured around fifty pieces of *boro* textiles; some pieces were also shown in the 2011 exhibition that Szczepanek and Kawasaki Kei curated at the Portland

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<sup>60</sup> Shari Cavin, in: Szczepanek, “Riches from Rags, Boro Textiles from Japan”, p.47.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander von Vegesack, “About Boisbuchet” [video, online], *Boisbuchet*, available at: <https://www.boisbuchet.org/about/> [Accessed 09 May 2020]

<sup>62</sup> “About Boisbuchet”, *Boisbuchet*, available at: <https://www.boisbuchet.org/about/> [Accessed 09 May 2020]

Japanese Garden – *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life* – which was discussed in Chapter One. For example, the *boro* displayed at Boisbuchet is the same piece that was in the *Mottainai* exhibition (Figure 15, Chapter 1). But the term “*boro*” was used differently in the two exhibitions. In *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life*, “*boro*” was used more like an adjective that was put before the names of the objects. For example, a “*boro noragi*” was used to describe a repaired work coat, and the patched work trousers and aprons were called “*boro momohiki*” and “*boro maekake*” respectively. However, in *Boro: The Fabric of Life*, the word “*boro*” was used collectively to represent all the repaired clothes made in Japan.



**Figure 21.** The display of *boro* at Domaine de Boisbuchet.

Photo courtesy of Domaine de Boisbuchet,

<https://www.boisbuchet.org/exhibitions/boro-the-fabric-of-life/>

Szczepanek is quoted in Boisbuchet’s exhibition description as follows:

*Boro* textiles were the domain of the ordinary man and represented a collective, impoverished past. They were largely forgotten after the mid-twentieth century when Japan's society shifted towards mass-scale modernisation and urbanisation. However, they are the tangible embodiment of a cultural legacy which has only recently been accorded a formal name and has received critical consideration.<sup>63</sup>

Here, Szczepanek was producing a specific cultural meaning of *boro* that applied to Japanese textile history and legacy. When *boro* was displayed with similar recently repaired textiles from other cultures, this statement made “*boro*” a term that was exclusive to Japan, and an aesthetic inspiration for contemporary textile design. For example, this exhibition included a group of contemporary *boro* pieces lent by the German architect Anna Heringer: these textiles had been produced by a women's cooperative initiated by Heringer in Bangladesh (figure 22). Although they were hung together with the Japanese *boro* robes on bamboo sticks, on Boisbuchet's web page they were called “inventively conceived textiles” rather than Indian *boro*. The introductory texts also emphasised how this exhibition read *boro* as a Japanese aesthetic, like *wabi sabi* and *mottainai*.<sup>64</sup> As an object, *boro* is exclusively Japanese, but as an aesthetic symbol it has much more potential to be explored.

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<sup>63</sup> « Boro at Domaine de Boisbuchet » *Disegno Daily*, 14 June 2013, available at: <https://www.disegnodaily.com/article/boro-at-domaine-de-boisbuchet> [Accessed 09 May 2020]

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*





**Figure 22.** Gallery in Domaine de Boisbuchet

Photo courtesy of Domaine de Boisbuchet

<https://www.boisbuchet.org/exhibitions/boro-the-fabric-of-life/>

*Boro: The Fabric of Life* didn't focus exclusively on vintage *boro*, and neither did it emphasise the universality of *boro*, as Nukata's and Wada's *boro* exhibition had done. Through incorporating the contemporary pieces into the exhibition, the curators communicated a message that the textiles, made from humble materials, had been reimagined and recreated in a contemporary fashion. In the narrative of vintage Japanese *boro*, women had been portrayed as caring mothers and wives who continually sacrificed themselves for their families. This exhibition, however, showcased another group of heroic women who had escaped from their oppressive and dangerous textile industry employment and "established their own brand identity, producing one-of-a-kind clothing which imbues a progressive social message into the vintage look that addresses the global marketplace's interest in authenticity."<sup>65</sup> In the planning stage before the exhibition, a group of students from Parsons School of Design in New York

<sup>65</sup> "Boro: The Fabric of Life", *Boisbuchet*, available at: <https://www.boisbuchet.org/exhibitions/boro-the-fabric-of-life/> [Accessed 09 May 2020]

were involved in this project, as part of the Parsons Fellowship Program at Domaine de Boisbucbet. These students were studying in different areas, including Design History, Urban Planning and Design Technology. Through the project, the students worked with the exhibition team to install objects, images, texts, and video material, and construct, paint and arrange backdrops for display.<sup>66</sup> Cooperation with other design and fashion institutions was also the approach taken in another exhibition curated by Szczepanek, at MUDE: Museu do Design e da Moda (Museum of Design and Fashion) in Lisbon, Portugal.

This touring exhibition was supported by CIRECA. After being shown in France, it travelled to Portugal and Germany during the following two years.<sup>67</sup> In October 2014, it came to MUDE in Lisbon for four months, presented as part of the exhibition *Japão a cru* (Raw Japan). The exhibition was part of two shows related to Japan: *Boro: o tecido da vida* (Boro – the Fabric of Life) and *Puras formas* (Naked Shapes) *Puras formas* featured 200 Japanese household objects, manufactured between 1910 and 1960.<sup>68</sup> According to *HALI* magazine, the overarching theme of the two exhibitions was framed in relation to “topical issues such as the preservation of material resources, respect for nature, reuse or transformation of materials and the lifetime of each product; while also heralding the simplicity and intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the functional Japanese object.”<sup>69</sup> At the end of the *HALI* report, readers are reminded of the other *boro* exhibition, that was on show in London – the Somerset House exhibition discussed earlier. The selection of venues for these two *boro* exhibitions are evidence of the curators’ interpretations of *boro*. Instead of hanging *boro* in a well-protected and polished art space,

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<sup>66</sup> “Boro: The Fabric of Life: Exhibition on Japanese Recycled Textiles is Focus of Parsons Fellowship Program at Domaine de Boisbucbet”, *The New School*, 10 July 2013, available at: [https://www.newschool.edu/pressroom/pressreleases/2013/boisbucbet\\_boro.htm](https://www.newschool.edu/pressroom/pressreleases/2013/boisbucbet_boro.htm) [Accessed 09 May 2020]

<sup>67</sup> “Boro: The Fabric of Life, 25 March – 2 August 2015”, *Museum Für Ostasiatische Kunst Köln*. <https://museum-fuer-ostasiatische-kunst.de/BORO> [Accessed 09 May 2020]

<sup>68</sup> “Boro: O tecido da vida, 10 Out.2014- 8 Fev. 2015”, *MUDE Design*, available at: [https://www.mude.pt/exposicoes/boro-fabric-of-life\\_46.html](https://www.mude.pt/exposicoes/boro-fabric-of-life_46.html) [Accessed 09 October 2018]

<sup>69</sup> “Raw Japan: Boro Blues in Lisbon”, *HALI*, 23 October 2014, available at: <https://www.hali.com/news/raw-japan-boro-mude-lisbon/> [Accessed 09 October 2018]

Szczepanek chose the Lisbon museum as a “*boro* building” that would correspond with the aesthetic of the exhibits (Figure 23).



**Figure 23.** *boro* display at MUDE in Lisbon. Photo courtesy of Stephen Szczepanek, Sri Gallery

According to a report for the integral requalification project of MUDE’s current building, before the museum took over this building it had been owned by the Banco Nacional Ultramarino (BNU, National Overseas Bank) since 1866, when the bank had only occupied the ground floor in the building.<sup>70</sup> As the bank owned more and more areas of this building, several

<sup>70</sup> Lisbon City Council: Integral Requalification Project for the Building Housing MUDE Museu do Design e da Moda, Coleção Francisco Capelo. The original pdf file has been removed from the museum’s website; another page briefly introduces this project. [https://www.mude.pt/mude/in-progress\\_2](https://www.mude.pt/mude/in-progress_2) [Accessed 15 June 2020]

design teams participated in the interior renovation work. In 1950, BNU took ownership of the entire property and decided to renovate it into a modernised headquarters, ripping out the Art Deco-style marble interior settings. However, in the middle of the reconstruction work, the Portuguese Institute for Architectural Heritage (IPPAR) listed the original marble design as valuable national heritage, and the refurbishment was halted, leaving the building in its still unrenovated condition.<sup>71</sup>

Based on the history of this space, the museum established a programme with the concept “The Ruin as Heritage and Aesthetics, The Museum as a Work in Progress, and the Exhibition as an Open Work”.<sup>72</sup> This museological programme lasted from 2009 to 2016: during that period, it continued to host public exhibitions while the building was undergoing preservation and structural reinforcement. When the *boro* exhibition travelled to MUDE, the stripped-back condition of the interior provided a backdrop that fitted the theme and the objects, and the building itself offered an example of *boro* in completely different conditions. Returning to the “*boro* thatched roof” discussed in Chapter One, both examples produce the meaning of *boro* in relation to a spatial concept. In addition to this, the stories associated with the building, including the extensive refurbishment works and the shifting value of the marble decoration, further reinforce the concept of *boro*. Watching these *boro* textiles hanging down from the stripped concrete roof inspired a new way of reading *boro* as objects, space and history.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 24.** *Boro* display in MUDE in Lisbon.

Photo courtesy of Stephen Szczepanek, Sri Gallery

As a design-focused museum and a member of the European Fashion Heritage Association, MUDE has a huge fashion collection.<sup>73</sup> This is another change of context from the other exhibitions in art spaces. It was shown in MUDE unambiguously in the context of design. The idea of “authentic *boro*” had given way to the aesthetic and sustainable values by which *boro* could continue inspire contemporary fashion and design practices. In the final section I will explore ways of displaying and interpreting *boro* in fashion museums.

<sup>73</sup> “MUDE at the European Fashion Heritage Association”, MUDE Design, available at: [https://www.mude.pt/noticias/mude-at-the-european-fashion-heritage-association\\_70](https://www.mude.pt/noticias/mude-at-the-european-fashion-heritage-association_70) [Accessed 19 Feb 2020]

## Exhibiting Boro in the Fashion World

Its function as a wearable item has always been an important aspect of *boro* since it was first made. In previous sections, examples have shown how *boro* was exhibited within the context of folk craft, art and design. The meanings and values of *boro* have been constantly produced and reshaped through this process, and in January 2016, *boro* was brought back to its home country and shown in Kōbe Fashion Museum exhibition *Aesthetics of Boro: From Peasant Clothing to Modern Fashion* (BORO の美学—野良着と現代ファッション).



**Figure 25.** Tanaka Chūzaburō’s collection shown at Kōbe Fashion Museum  
Photograph: Kōbe Fashion Museum

Kōbe Fashion Museum opened in 1997, and is known as the first public art museum with a fashion focus in Japan. To highlight Kōbe as a city of fashion, the museum was set up to promote fashion-related industry and culture, and it also functions as a facility for education and training, with a library and resource centre within the museum.<sup>74</sup> Although this exhibition featured the vintage *boro* from Tanaka Chūzaburō’s collection, the theme of the *boro*

<sup>74</sup> “Kobe Fashion Museum, Kobe-shi, Japan.”, *HiSoUR*, available at: <https://www.hisour.com/kobe-fashion-museum-kobe-shi-japan-45048/> [Accessed 26 June 2020]

exhibition clearly pointed to the objective of bridging the hundred-year-old cloth together with twenty-first-century fashion. As the introduction to the exhibition brochure stated:

In the old days, people around the world kept reusing ragged cloth due to undeveloped social productivity. Patchwork exists in different cultures, and in Japan it is called “lan lü” (*boro*). Nowadays it is known to the world as dynamic art, and attracts designers from the field of fashion. This exhibition mainly showcases the *boro* collection from Mr. Tanaka Chūzaburō, the folklorist living in Aomori who has been conducting research and collecting local antiques and everyday objects and has more than 30000 pieces. In this exhibition, there will be around one hundred pieces from Tanaka’s *boro* collection, and it will also include some work by Japanese fashion designers which reflects the idea of reusing materials in design practice.

Before mass production, the Japanese *mottainai* spirit can be easily found in people’s everyday life. As a precious aesthetic principle and attitude towards life, we believe that it deserves to be taken to the next generation, and we hope this exhibition will contribute to this.<sup>75</sup>

The text above explains the most important reasons for *boro*’s return to Japan: global recognition, as both a work of art and a fashion inspiration. Other key words in the texts, such as “reusing”, “*mottainai* spirit”, “aesthetic principle” and “life attitude”, have been constructed by collectors, curators and makers through the constant creation of value and meaning, as the case studies have explained in this and earlier chapters. From the Ōsaka ABC Gallery to the Kōbe Fashion Museum, the changing attitude and interpretations of *boro* are evidence of the successful construction of this idea within the

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<sup>75</sup> “Aesthetics of *Boro*: From Peasant Clothing to Modern Fashion” (BOROの美学—野良着と現代ファッション). Exhibition brochure. (Kōbe: Kōbe Fashion Museum, 2016)

Japanese context. Comparing the Kōbe exhibition to the one in Amuse Museum, it was also special in particular ways.

In Amuse Museum, as the previous chapter mentioned, touching the exhibited objects was permitted, but when the same collection of *boro* were shown at the Kōbe Fashion Museum, touching was not allowed. Taking one particular *donja* jacket as an example, in the Kōbe Fashion Museum it was laid out partly on an inclined surface and partly on a rack; therefore, the audience could only see one side of the garment (Figure 26). In Amuse Museum, the same *donja* jacket was put on a T-shaped stainless-steel rack hanging from the ceiling (Figure 27). The Amuse Museum presentation of *boro* enabled closer interactions between the viewer and the object, and the audience was able to see not only the surface, but also the inner fabrics and hemp stuffing hidden inside. The Amuse Museum display tended to make the audience feel they were being confronted by a person, whereas the Kōbe Fashion Museum display took a traditional fashion exhibition approach, which created a distance between the objects and the viewer.



**Figure 26 (Left).** *Donja* jacket on display at Kōbe Fashion Museum

**Figure 27 (Right).** *Donja* jacket on display in Amuse Museum Tokyo



Second, Kōbe Fashion Museum invited contemporary Japanese fashion designers to show their work in parallel with *boro*. These designers and brands included Kanda Keisuke (Keisuke Kanda), Horihata Hiroyuki and Sekiguchi Makiko (Matohu), and Yamagata Yoshikazu (Writtenafterwards). In this exhibition, *boro* as a Japanese aesthetic was not just highlighted in the exhibition title, but also exemplified in work by designers who are current practitioners. For example, Figure 28 shows a “bondage pants *boro*” designed by Kanda Keisuke. According to the product description, every piece is made by hand, and the materials come from old clothes. Therefore, garments by Keisuke Kanda are all unique.<sup>76</sup> Kanda infused the two elements of *boro*, hand-making and used fabrics, into her work, and translated *boro* into “uniqueness” in her own fashion language. Designers have interpreted *boro* in different ways, and further examples of this will be discussed in Chapter Four.



**Figure 28.** “Bondage pants *boro*” designed by Kanda Keisuke

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<sup>76</sup> Keisuke Kanda, *Palm*, available at: <https://www.store.palm-jpn.com/c/palmmaison/715-keisukekanda-36> [Accessed 20 January 2020]

Through the young designers' work, the exhibition in Kōbe Fashion Museum showed how *boro* could resonate with current Japanese fashion design. As *boro* has gained global recognition in recent years, curators have created further interactions with *boro* through changing themes and narratives. In June 2018, I went to the exhibition *Values of Design*, organised by Design Society in Shekou, China. Design Society is a cultural hub established in 2018 as part of the partnership between the V&A Museum and China Merchants Shekou.<sup>77</sup> The title of this exhibition brings me back to an earlier question: “is *boro* design?” If so, how will *boro* be displayed and interpreted within a group of other designed products?



**Figure 29.** *Boro* shown at the exhibition *Values of Design*  
Photograph by Leren Li

Curated by Brendan Cormier, the objects displayed in *Values of Design* were divided into seven categories, within the themes of “Performance”, “Cost”, “Problem Solving”, “Materials”, “Identity”, “Communication” and “Wonder”. The *boro* robe acquired by the V&A

<sup>77</sup> China Merchants Shekou Industrial Zoon Holdings Co., Ltd is a public company based in Shenzhen, China. It is a subsidiary of China Merchants Group. “About V&A at Design Society Shekou”, *V&A Museum*, available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/va-at-design-society-shekou> [Accessed 15 July 2019]

Museum (Figure 20) was in the “Materials” category, put next to an Indian Katran rocking chair. Without mentioning its repaired nature, the exhibition defined *boro* as a Japanese tradition of creating textiles and clothing from rags and scraps of cloth.<sup>78</sup> In relation to the value of *boro*, this “lies in the highly sophisticated sewing and weaving techniques, creating beautiful textures and patterns from materials whose history spans multiple generations”.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the value of *boro* to the material aspect of design lay in the creation of new materials through reused materials and advanced techniques. Once the meanings of *boro* have been widely developed in different fields, curators just need the elements that can help to construct the idea that they want to express. In this case, Cormier read *sashiko*, the running stitches, as a highly sophisticated technique, while Kanda translated *sashiko* into a reference to the hand-made. The process of creating meaning is like making patchwork: one patch might be sewn in different places by different wearers, depending on their own needs. In this case, *boro* continues to become a new concept with changing contexts.

A year after the V&A Museum’s *boro* acquisition’s display in China, in October 2019, Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT) invited Tatsumi Kiyoshi to show the Amuse Museum collection in an exhibition at the Museum of Ethnic Costumes at BIFT. As Chapter Two has explained, the museum had been closed since March 2019 and the director, Tatsumi scheduled a global tour of exhibitions of Tanaka’s collection. The first stop on the Chinese leg of the tour was this show at BIFT. Before Beijing, this collection had travelled to Australia, and was exhibited in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. After the BIFT exhibition, the collection travelled to the Shenzhen Fine Art Institute as part of their Exhibition of Benevolent Design.

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<sup>78</sup> Brendan Cormier, (ed.), *Values of Design* (Shanghai: Shanghai Fine Art Publishers, 2018), p.132.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Considering the potentially large audience numbers for the show within a short exhibition period, all the overseas exhibitions prohibited the viewers from touching the fabrics. At BIFT, most objects were displayed behind glass, except for the six *donja* jackets hanging in the centre (Figure 30). In our interview, Tatsumi pointed out that his responsibility in the overseas exhibitions is to take care of the collection and give advice based on his previous curatorial experience of *boro*.<sup>80</sup> Local institutions could design the exhibition according to their own specialist context. For example, in the Shenzhen Art Institute, the director, Sen Kong, invited a group of artists to give a performance in response to the theme of *boro*, and in the BIFT exhibition featured educational practices.



**Figure 30.** Exhibition *Ragged Clothing Out of Transcendent Soul*.  
Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China.

<sup>80</sup> Tatsumi Kiyoshi, interviewed by Leren Li. 20 October 2019. Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China. Translated by Yoshi Cho. Threadbare: The Social History of Japanese *Boro*, *Selvedge*, 81 (March 2019), p.70.

<sup>80</sup> Kiyoshi Tatsumi, "Boro, Amuse Museum and Chuzaburo Tanaka." Academic Forum Speech, *Design of Sustainable Concepts from the International Perspective*, Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China, October 21, 2019. Speech translated by Yoshi Cho. This speech was simultaneously translated during the conference.

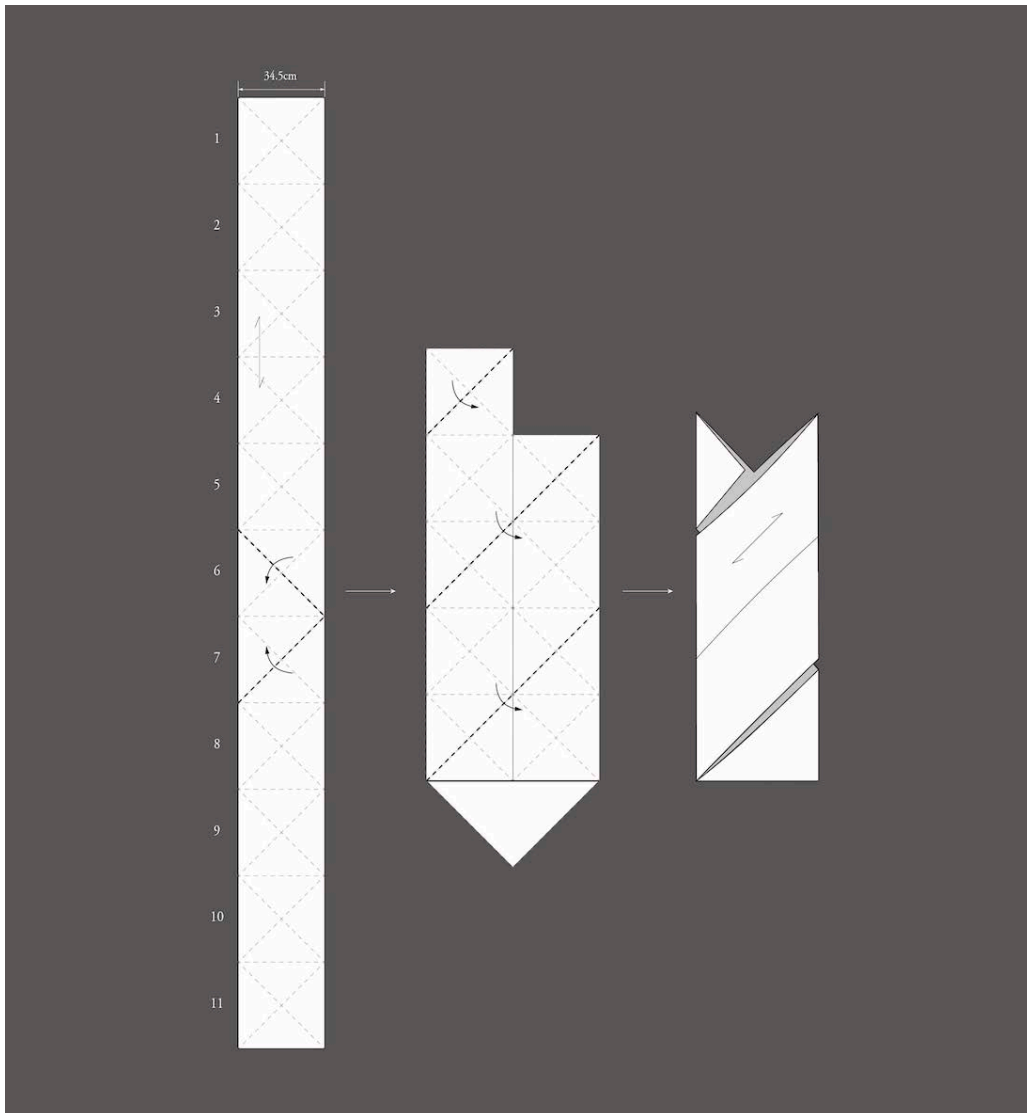
At BIFT, the audience was mainly fashion students and designers, and the expressed aim was for “cultural study and cooperation in Sino-Japanese clothing”.<sup>81</sup> Supervised by Professor Yuhong Liu, a group of graduate students conducted an investigation of Tanaka Chūzaburō’s collection. Through measuring, drafting, patterning making and sewing, the group used muslin to make replicas of kimonos, work trousers, children’s trousers and *tsunobukuro* (“horn bags”, used for farmers to carry grain). *Tsunobukuro* consist of a single long piece of fabric, sewn together on the bias to produce a better stretch and protect the stitching from exposure. To help students and other audience members to understand how the object was made, the replica and the sketch were displayed with the original *tsunobukuro* to explain its construction process, as seen in Figures 31, 32 and 33.



**Figure 31 (left).** Original *tsunobukuro*. From Chūzaburō Tanaka collection.  
Photograph by Leren Li.

**Figure 32 (right).** *Tsunobukuro* replica.  
Made by students from BIFT, supervised by Yuhong Liu. Photograph by Leren Li.

<sup>81</sup> He Yang, Exhibition Introduction. *Ragged Clothing Out of Transcendent Soul*. 19 October 2019 to 3 December 2019. Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China.



**Figure 33.** “Horn” bag construction study. Sketch provided by Yuhong Liu.

The sartorial research into Tanaka’s *boro* collection mainly explored the structure of the clothing, and the patched areas were not highlighted in the sketches and replicas. But in Tatsumi’s opinion, *boro* is actually a designed work, made after careful thought.<sup>82</sup> The makers might not have been professional fashion designers, but, in Tatsumi’s opinion, the patterns they cut, and the positioning of the patches, were decided with great consideration. To present themselves as attractive to the people they cared about, people tried their best to show

<sup>82</sup> Tatsumi Kiyoshi, interviewed by Leren Li. 20 October 2019. Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China. Translated by Yoshi Cho.

themselves at their best.<sup>83</sup> This is one of the reasons for the raggedness of *boro*. And Tatsumi believed that *boro* has its origins in dressing up, and it exemplified a biological human impulse.

The clothing study project was only presented in the BIFT *boro* exhibition; alongside the Amuse Museum collection, the museum also held an exhibition on sustainable innovation design. This arrangement was similar to the earlier exhibition at the Kōbe Fashion Museum, but at BIFT, most of the new designs were made by college students and their teachers. Regarding his decision to collaborate in this way, Tatsumi considered two aspects: first, the space must be able to hold at least a hundred pieces, in order to tell a relatively comprehensive story about *boro* and out of respect to the lifelong hard work carried out by Tanaka Chūzaburō. Secondly, he emphasised the importance of “new ideas” and “collaboration” between each institution and the original collection. In the case of BIFT, exhibiting *boro* in the museum of a fashion school raised the recognition of *boro* in an academic context. On 21 October 2019, Tatsumi Kiyoshi was invited by the conference *Design of Sustainable Concepts from an International Perspective* at BIFT to give a speech entitled “Boro, Amuse Museum and Tanaka Chūzaburō”.<sup>84</sup> Attendees were mostly fashion and textile scholars, museum directors and curators, designers, students and teachers from BIFT and other art schools in Beijing. Corresponding to the conference theme, Tatsumi addressed the historical aspect of the Japanese recycling tradition, and used *boro* to exemplify a Japanese approach to sustainability. He also referred to the exhibition at the Kōbe Fashion Museum to remind the audience how the *boro* aesthetic had been embraced by contemporary Japanese fashion.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Kiyoshi Tatsumi, “Boro, Amuse Museum and Chuzaburo Tanaka.” *Design of Sustainable Concept from the International Perspective*. Academic Forum Speech, Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China. October 21, 2019. Translated by Yoshi Cho.



**Figure 34.** Presentation entitled “Boro, Amuse Museum and Tanaka Chuzaburo.” In *Design of Sustainable Concept from the International Perspective*, conference organised by BIFT, Beijing, China. October 21, 2019. Photograph by Leren Li.

Exhibiting *boro* at BIFT was an experimental attempt to promote *boro* in fashion education. Before the exhibition, Tatsumi offered training to the students volunteering as museum guides. As well as Tanaka’s collecting stories, Tatsumi proposed four key words for the design students to reflect on: ecology, technique, emotion and patina.<sup>85</sup> Drawing on the features of *boro* – reusing limited resources, adopting *sashiko* stitches, embracing human care and appreciating the passing of time, Tatsumi translated them into a more refined aesthetic principle to educate the student audience. He Yang, the director of Museum of Ethnic Costumes, defined *boro* explicitly as an aesthetic concept from Japan based on the ideas of saving and cherishing things.<sup>86</sup> As He Yang noted, *boro* as an aesthetic concept had a “unique form”, and it also embodied the “historical clues” of sustainability.<sup>87</sup> This concept of “*boro* as sustainable

<sup>85</sup> Tatsumi Kiyoshi, Exhibition Introduction. *Ragged Clothing Out of Transcendent Soul*. 19 October 2019 to 3 December 2019. Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China. Translated by Yoshi Cho.

<sup>86</sup> He Yang, Exhibition Introduction. *Ragged Clothing Out of Transcendent Soul*. 19 October 2019 to 3 December 2019. Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*



aesthetics” was continued as a theme when the Amuse Museum collection travelled to New York’s Japan Society in March 2020.

Founded in 1907, Japan Society is a non-profit organisation committed to promoting cultural exchange between Japan and the United States to deepen mutual understanding.<sup>88</sup> The title of the exhibition at Japan Society was *Boro Textiles: Sustainable Aesthetics*, and was curated by gallery director Yukie Kamiya and assistant curator Tiffany Lambert. The exhibition opened on 6 March, but closed shortly afterwards due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the video tour posted online, there are around 50 pieces from Tanaka’s collection displayed into four categories: *donja*, *tanzen* (padded kimono), work trousers and accessories. The historical narratives of this clothing, in terms of the shortage of materials, labour, the harsh climate and cloth production techniques, have been investigated in Chapter Two. But unlike the other *boro* exhibitions, this exhibition attempts to connect vintage *boro* with the work of three globally established Japanese fashion designers, Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto (Figure 35). To explain the connections, Lambert refers to the terms “deconstruction patchwork” “pared-down materials” and “surface manipulation of garments” to describe the signature design aesthetics of the three avant-garde designers.<sup>89</sup> From the curator’s point of view, these aesthetic qualities resonate well with features of *boro*.

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<sup>88</sup> “Japan Society Mission Statement”, *Japan Society*, available at: <https://www.japansociety.org/page/about/overview> [Accessed 2 May 2020]

<sup>89</sup> Tiffany Lambert, *Boro Textiles: Sustainable Aesthetics* Video Tour part 5 [online YouTube video], available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mejYVDY\\_jHw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mejYVDY_jHw) [Accessed 30 May 2020]



**Figure 35.** Installation of *Boro Textiles: Sustainable Aesthetics*.  
Photo courtesy of Japan Society, New York.

There is no actual evidence to prove that *boro* influenced the work of these designers, but hanging as a backdrop, *boro* performs a more metaphorical meaning here. In a fashion context, *boro* represents a deconstructive approach, and also an aesthetics of irregularity, imperfection and the avoidance of waste. Although this is the first *boro* exhibition to involve internationally known designers, the dialogue between *boro* and Western high fashion has continued since 2013 when Kim Jones, the creative director of Louis Vuitton, brought *boro* style to the catwalk in his Spring 2013 menswear collection. Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto are credited by this exhibition as creating the new Japanese aesthetics which influenced global fashion, and *boro* is also becoming a new fashion today. The Japan Society exhibition is indeed a curatorial experiment, while it is also a result of the globalised practice of *boro* in the field of fashion. This chapter has focused on the creation of value and meaning for *boro* through global exhibiting practices, and Chapter Four will continue to explore this globalising process by exploring the interaction between Japanese *boro* and Western fashion culture.

## Conclusion

In the discussion of transcultural interpretations and the creation of value for *boro*, global curatorial practices play an important role in terms of promoting *boro* to transcend its origins from Japanese folk craft to objects celebrated in the art, design and fashion world. Following this structure, this chapter investigates the evolving process of *boro* through different types of exhibitions in different countries.

The first section examines Nukata Kousaku's exhibition in Ōsaka's ABC Gallery, the first *boro* exhibition in Japan, and compares it with Tanaka Chūzaburō's exhibition in Chapter Two. Nostalgia was an important part of both exhibitions, but in 2000 Nukata had revealed the universality of "*boro*" and displayed an "Ethiopian *boro*" in parallel with the Japanese *boro*. As a collector and artist, Nukata also read *boro* from its creative aspects and incorporated these in his painting practice. Using the example of the installation works of another Chinese artist, Li Xiangming, I argued that the universal "*boro* experience" applies not only to *boro* collecting and exhibiting activities – it has also been embraced by contemporary art in various forms and approaches.

Moving to early exhibitions in America, *Ragged Beauty* and *Riches from Rags* both focused on promoting Japanese repaired textiles in the American cultural context. In *Ragged Beauty*, Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada followed Nukata's approach of demonstrating the universal practice of repair through the idea of showing "*boro*" with other mended objects and contemporary repaired works from different cultures. However, Yoshida designed *Riches from Rags* as an exhibition focusing exclusively on Japanese repair culture. Although the term "*boro*" was not used, his later reflection on this exhibition, and his book, implied that the notion of *boro* is materially and geographically wider than the current understanding of it.

Inspired by Yoshida's exhibition and other tribal art events in San Francisco, Italian textile collector David Sorgato started promoting *boro* in Europe in 2004 and later left the *boro*

market because of its soaring prices. In 2014, Paris-based gallerist Philippe Boudin organised a selling exhibition of *boro* at Somerset House, London, which marked the transition of *boro* from antiques market to the art world. Now that *boro* has become collectible art, there have been debates about its authenticity. From a collecting perspective, the value of a “real” *boro* piece depends on its age, its degree of deterioration and the fact that it has no recent adjustments made to it. However, local Japanese define the authenticity of *boro* by the evidence it offers of a genuine act of sewing and mending. Discovering these contrasting approaches prompted me to reflect on male and female collectors’ different attitudes and interpretations towards their collections, and I argue that the way that collectors position themselves will significantly influence the authenticity and market value of their *boro* collections.

Regarding the curatorial experiments with transforming *boro* into the design world, I use two exhibitions curated by Szczepanek in France and Portugal to highlight the way that the curator cooperated with design and fashion institutions to frame a *boro* exhibition. In displaying *boro* with similar repaired textiles from other cultures, Szczepanek tried to produce a specific cultural meaning of *boro* that applied to Japanese textile history and its legacy. Within a design context, *boro* is exclusive to Japan as an object, but as an aesthetic symbol it has much more potential to be explored.

In the last section, I use four examples to discuss the presentation of *boro* in various fashion-related institutions. Through a comparison of exhibitions at Ōsaka’s ABC Gallery and one at the Kōbe Fashion Museum, I have demonstrated a shift in attitude towards *boro* in Japan, which paved the way for the future acceptance of *boro* as a fashion style. In addition, the *boro* piece acquired by the V&A Museum and later displayed in Shekou further confirms the value of *boro* in terms of design, material, and techniques. In the BIFT exhibition, not only were the stories of *boro* brought to China: fashion students also conducted a clothing construction study to analyse the structure and create replicas of several pieces from Tanaka’s collection. At the

BIFT conference on design and sustainability, the director of Amuse Museum proposed the consideration of *boro* as a sustainable aesthetic, and this idea was later adopted as the theme of Tanaka's touring exhibition at the New York Japan Society. In the New York exhibition, *boro* has been created as a traditional Japanese aesthetic that resonates with three pioneering Japanese avant-garde fashion designers. This ongoing exhibition is an evidence of the successful construction of *boro* around a cycle of "folkcraft – art – design – fashion", and sets the tone for the research into the contemporary refashioned *boro* style in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Refashioning *Boro* Through Contemporary Design Practice**

#### **Introduction**

During the past ten years or more, a considerable amount of attention has been paid to sustainable fashion and slow fashion by design scholars, creative practitioners and fashion brands. In addition to a transition in the public attitude to *boro*, the recent incorporation of *boro*-inspired designs into current fashion practice is also notable. Building on the content of Chapter Three, this chapter brings new insights to the value creation of *boro* in the fashion industry. The cases explored in this chapter cover established fashion labels and amateur craft work.

This chapter starts with an exploration of the changing attitudes toward *boro* with the rise of vintage consumption in Japan. As vintage fashion has evolved from subculture to mainstream in many cultures, it is never a shameful thing to wear something ragged. Through one of the signature vintage dressing practices the second section will focus on the rediscovery of *boro* in Japan combined with the influence of American denim culture. As *boro* shares a number of features with denim fabric in terms of material, colour and function, some contemporary fashion brands combine the two ideas together to create a new “street fashion” look. After the discussions about foreign influences on the *boro* style, the third section will investigate how Japanese “poverty chic” has become luxurious in contemporary fashion and how people react to this. This section will draw on designs by fashion houses and independent fashion designers in Japan and globally to demonstrate how *boro* is translated into their design languages. The global refashioning of *boro* raises questions about how fashion transforms the values from a symbol of a despised culture to a new luxury and sustainable creation, which leads to a new discussion about Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory.

In the final part of this chapter, I will investigate how *boro* is created by independent makers, and how people without professional training engage with their *boro* practices. In discussing these *boro* makers, I highlight the work of independent artisans in Japan and discuss a *boro* workshop I participated in London. I also discuss the concept of knowledge co-creation through *boro* communities. As I myself have become part of the research for this chapter, at the end of this chapter I will reflect on my participation in the community as a researcher in an autoethnographic sense.

### **From Second-Hand to Vintage Design**

Driven by a growing interest in unique outfits that signal individuality, vintage fashion is more popular than ever. Wearing second-hand clothing became a fashion phenomenon and a commodified fashion alternative to wearing new designs in many cultures in the late twentieth century. People who could afford new garments started to consider also wearing pre-owned clothing, a practice that was traditionally associated with poverty. In relation to the rise in vintage consumption and retro style that has grown from a subcultural expression to mainstream dress practice, fashion historians and theorists have tried to explain the reasons behind the craze for vintage in fashion. Alexandra Palmer ascribes this shift in the wearing of vintage style from a subcultural context to “the disappointing fact that, regardless of price, fashion today is rarely exclusive.”<sup>1</sup> Angela McRobbie identifies it as part of the current vogue for nostalgia and suggests that it is also a way of “bringing history into an otherwise ahistorical present”.<sup>2</sup> Palmer also argues that wearing vintage and retro clothing can be understood as “a

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Palmer, "Vintage Whores and Vintage Virgins: Second Hand Fashion in the Twenty-first Century", in: Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark, *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion* (Dress, Body, Culture). (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p.97–214.

<sup>2</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Second-Hand Dress and the Role of the Rag market”, in: *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music* (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan, 1989), p.23.

desire to recreate a sense of familiarity”, which she further explains as a subjective idea that brings people emotional satisfaction in a rapidly changing, and also increasingly impersonal, world.<sup>3</sup> Vintage fashion can be seen as a soft rebellion against a rapidly changing environment, and helps wearers to feel reconnected with an earlier era when things were purer and simpler.

In Japan, large numbers of second-hand British smock-frocks, vintage French work jackets, German hunting jackets and American denim clothing are now piled up in antique clothing shops. According to Edwin Jiang, writing for *The Business of Fashion (BoF)* Japan has some of finest vintage fashion in the world, and although the country’s economy has been stagnant for years, domestic sales of vintage fashion do not seem to have been damaged.<sup>4</sup> Returning to retro habits reflects a Japanese attitude that embraces the other side of the economic downturn. As Valerie Steele describes, “the Japanese are really the most neophilic people in the world, and a lot of young Japanese have less money than they used to; therefore over the last few years, the sale of vintage and used clothing has skyrocketed”.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the sluggish economy and hipster spending habits, in *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* Kawamura Yuniya outlines other social and cultural factors that may have contributed to several growing subcultural phenomena and influenced the dress practices of the younger Japanese generation – for instance, the current employment system and the marriage , fertility , divorce , and suicide rates. Concerning the collapse of traditional values and ideologies that no longer enable a society to function properly in the contemporary context, Kawamura concludes that the questioning of the status quo by individuals, especially young people, to search for and create something else, is a natural phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Palmer.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Jiang, “In Japan, Tapping the World’s Best Vintage”, *Business of Fashion*, 7 October 2016, available at: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/global-currents/in-japan-tapping-the-worlds-best-vintage>[Accessed 5 November 2019]

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Steele, in Jiang.

<sup>6</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, "Japanese Youth in a Changing Society", in: *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (London: Berg, 2012), p.33-42.



Economic recession, a desire for individuality and simply nostalgia are factors that have made vintage fashion well accepted and widely adopted in Japan. Meanwhile, Japan is still one of the major countries for luxury consumption, and the Japanese market is extremely fashion conscious, with very short and fast-moving trend cycles. Japanese consumers have a natural tendency to seek variety; moreover, a national heritage that appreciates crafts also influences people's preferences for dynamic fashion styles. In Hye-Shin Kim, Eunah Yoh and Eun-Young Shin's research on retailing in Japan, they first confirm that fashion has been considered a symbol of social status in Japan, with higher quality and brand names being preferred.<sup>7</sup> They then argue that although the appetite for luxury brands remains strong, consumers have already gained a sense of confidence in their consumption of fashion, which encourages them to explore fashion goods for "personal satisfaction and well-being rather than conspicuous consumption".<sup>8</sup> At the same time, according to the authors Japanese people's perception of social strata is beginning to change, "with 'lower-class society' establishing itself as a buzzword."<sup>9</sup> This "lower-class society" is mainly represented by casual wear and young consumers aged between twelve to thirty-five. Compared with consumers in the same age group in other countries, Japanese people in the thirteen to thirty-five age group have greater purchasing power, which enables them to become leaders in the Japanese fashion market.<sup>10</sup> In this light, objects previously sold in thrift shops, Salvation Army charity donations and flea markets are now called "pre-loved", "designer resale" and "shabby chic".

Fashion designers who had traditionally had no interest in the vintage look started to look for inspiration to old garments and to incorporate a vintage aesthetic into their designs. Adopting a vintage look in contemporary design is a material way to engage with the past. For

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<sup>7</sup> Hye-Shin Kim, Eunah Yoh, and Eun-Young Shin. "Garment Manufacture and Retailing in Japan", in: John E. Vollmer (ed.), *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: East Asia*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010), p. 380–389.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

example, Kate Irvin, writing on the historical and contemporary social context of indigo, carried out a close study of the Japanese *boro noragi* (work jacket) to highlight the way that work clothes, indigo dyeing and the aesthetics of poverty have garnered attention in avant-garde and sustainable fashion.<sup>11</sup> Irvin quotes Caroline Evans in *Fashion at the Edge*: “When designers fetishized craft techniques, emphasizing the beauty of the flaw and the value of the mark of the hand, they performed a kind of alchemy”.<sup>12</sup> In order to market brands, designers will sometimes use images, signs or other elements from ethnic cultures to create certain “authenticity” in their designs. Irvin refers to work by Japanese designer Junya Watanabe as an example of contemporary design that incorporates world textile traditions, artisanship and utility, and Irvin specifically mentions that the use of indigo-dyed cottons and *boro* reinforcing technique in Watanabe’s collections.<sup>13</sup> In his review of Junya Watanabe’s Spring 2015 menswear collection, Tim Blanks points to the designer’s experiments with “Japanese tradition”, saying:

After what feels like years absorbed by the nuances of European workwear, Watanabe came home this season with a brilliant collection built on *boro*, the traditional Japanese patchwork that began centuries ago as peasant clothing. It was still the humble working man that the designer was celebrating, but *boro* has such a dense, furiously worked quality that each garment seemed to be telling a story. Patchwork has served Watanabe well in the past. But *boro* has a particular beauty that elevated this collection.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kate Irvin, "Lives Lived: An Archaeology of Faded Indigo", in: Jonathan Faiers and Mary Westerman Bulgarella (eds.), *Colors in Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p.199-209.

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), quoted by Kate Irvin, "Lives Lived: An Archaeology of Faded Indigo", in Jonathan Faiers and Mary Westerman Bulgarella (eds.), *Colors in Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p.199-209.

<sup>13</sup> Irvin.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Blanks, Junya Watanabe Spring 2015 Menswear, Review *Vogue* [online], 27 June 2014, available at: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2015-menswear/junya-watanabe> [Accessed 27 April 2020]



**Figure 1.** Junya Watanabe Menswear 2015 Spring Ready to Wear collection. Source: *Vogue*

*Boro* is not the only ethnic cultural element that Watanabe celebrates: traditional Japanese motifs such as camellias, chrysanthemums, dragons, clouds and ocean waves were all included in this collection. Positioning the idea of *boro* in parallel with these other symbols, Watanabe created the conditions for a new acceptance of the *boro* look as a Japanese aesthetic in the contemporary fashion industry. Although these clothes were not made from vintage *boro* fabrics, Watanabe's "new *boro*" employed the symbolic meaning of *boro* to translate the idea of "second-hand" and "vintage" into a Japanese context. In creating a contemporary design identity, this collection honours the aesthetics of the past in newly designed garments.

In an approach that differs from Watanabe's use of denim or other machine-made indigo fabrics, another Japanese brand, KUON, has created "the new *boro*" with vintage fabrics acquired from local Japanese people in Tōhoku.



**Figure 2.** *Boro* blazer, KUON.  
Photograph by Yohey Goto.

Founded in 2014 by Fujiwara Arata and designer Ishibashi Shinichirō, KUON is a Japanese brand that upcycles vintage *boro* fabrics into “new *boro* clothing”. Fujiwara and Ishibashi launched their collections in 2016, with two seasons (Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter) every year. Each seasonal collection comprises around twenty “looks” that include various kinds of unisex garments. KUON claims to use “authentic *boro* fabrics” acquired from village households and stitched by local women from Otsuchi-cho, in Iwate prefecture in the Tōhoku region.<sup>15</sup> In an interview by Petra Holmberg, Fujiwara talked about the Great East Japan Earthquake in Tōhoku on March 11, 2011, the results of which meant that approximately ten per cent of the population of Otsuchi-cho went missing or died.<sup>16</sup> As part of the social responsibility addressed in the brand statement, Fujiwara commissioned local women there to carry out the stitching, both as a way of honouring local textile history and to help these women to make a living.

<sup>15</sup> Petra Holmberg, “Rags to Riches: Boro Fashion” *Vav* magazine, 4 (2016), available at: [http://en.vavmagasinet.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Boro\\_Sakiori\\_Eng.pdf](http://en.vavmagasinet.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Boro_Sakiori_Eng.pdf), p.17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 3.** Boro Blazer, KUON  
Picture courtesy of KUON

Drawing on the widely accepted history of *boro* as both a cherished material and as the provider of protection to people living in the snow-bound Tōhoku region, KUON’s design concept has elevated the “vintage new” look to the status of cultural heritage. In 2016, a KUON *boro* blazer (Figure 3) was acquired by the Ethnographic Museum (Etnografiska museet) in Stockholm, and was displayed in the 2016 exhibition *Japan Byter Om* (Japan Changes), that included a section examining changes in fashion in Japan over the previous century. The curator, Petra Holmberg, included an antique *sashiko* stitched jacket and KUON’s new *boro* blazer together in the exhibition to prompt the audience to reflect on the shifting value of objects in Swedish thrift culture.<sup>17</sup> Compared with the showing of vintage *boro* pieces in the

<sup>17</sup> Petra Holmberg, “Trasor Nu Och Då.”, *Varldskulturmuseerna*, 29 March 2016, available at: <http://samlingar.varldskulturmuseerna.se/trasor-nu-och-da/> [Accessed 15 March 2020]

exhibitions discussed in Chapter Three, the displaying of this KUON jacket in a museum space challenges the definition of “vintage” with “the co-production of new and old”.<sup>18</sup>

The term “the co-production of new and old” is used by Heike Jenss in her article *Vintage: Fashioning Time*, and in this research on vintage style Jenss suggests that the meaning of “vintage”, and the creation of its value, is a two-way process, involving “both the ones trading in newness and those trading in the old.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of KUON, the vintage-ness of the jacket came from a combination of an old “look” – made by the “real” old. Presenting a new fashion silhouette constructed from old fabrics in an ethnographic museum carries connotations of time and age, place and heritage. KUON’s vintage look is built on the “atmospheric values” created by time-embedded materials: it carries with it the imagined warmth and “human substance” of the objects from an earlier era, which, as Baudrillard’s observes, is “something we want to rescue from time”.<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard’s substances, whether natural or synthetic, old or new, are simply what they are.<sup>21</sup> In other words, KUON’s use of vintage fabrics does not make its garments more “authentic” and “vintage” than Junya Watanabe’s machine-made “new *boro*”. What makes it more valuable is the atmospheric values endowed to the object by people.

The discussion of Junya Watanabe’s and KUON’s fashion practices will be continued in later sections, as their designs are not only a reaction to the current popularity of vintage fashion, but also examples of high-priced nostalgia. Fashion thrives on difference and individuality, and this is the motivation for shifts in style. In the recent revitalisation of *boro*, the change in the popular attitude to second-hand and vintage clothing is one of the reasons

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<sup>18</sup> Heike Jenss, "Vintage: Fashioning Time." In *Fashioning Memory: Vintage Style and Youth Culture*, 15–36. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), accessed April 26, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474262002.ch-002>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London & New York: Verso, 2005), p.38.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, p.39.

that these styles are back in vogue. In the next section, I will discuss another factor that shapes contemporary Japanese designers' interpretation of *boro* design.

### **American Denim Culture Inspires New *Boro***

In Chapter One, this thesis discussed how “forgotten traditions” have gained attention in Japan through cross-cultural sharing and borrowing activities, such as the touring of the Whitney Museum’s American quilts exhibition to Japan. Japan has learnt quickly how to absorb cultural essences from foreign countries, shaping them into Japanese culture and re-exporting them to the world. This section will explore the interrelationship between American denim culture and the current *boro* style and will investigate how denim culture influences newly designed *boro*.

In relation to the history of denim, and the reasons why people wear denim, there has been much debate by scholars who have explored denim from historical, commercial and other approaches. In 2006, anthropologist Daniel Miller and sociologist Sophie Woodward established the Global Denim Project to explain why denim clothing is worn so widely in a global context.<sup>22</sup> Miller and Woodward indicate that, in every region where denim is worn, people have their own highly specific reasons for establishing local relationships to denim.<sup>23</sup> In Karen Tranberg Hansen’s research on the international second-hand clothing trade, she points out the Japanese enthusiasm for blue jeans, especially Levi Strauss 501s, the original button-fly jeans originally created for miners and cowboys in the American West.<sup>24</sup> In Woodward’s ethnographic research into the artisan making of jeans in Kojima, a town in Japan

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward, "Global Denim", in: Joanne B. Eicher and Phyllis G. Tortora (eds.), *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, “Charity, Commerce, Consumption”, in Laurence Fontaine, *Alternative Exchanges: Second-Hand Circulations from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), p.223.

that has reinvented itself as a centre of jeans production, she reveals how the manufacturers there dissected and analysed Levi's jeans to make their own "Japanese" jeans.<sup>25</sup> For example, manufacturers would purchase denim weaving looms from the United States in order to create a characteristic "Levi's jeans selvedge" in their jeans. The Japanese denim industry was heavily influenced by the United States, and Levi's jeans also became part of a particular group of Japanese people's fashion nostalgia in the 1990s.

In the interviews I conducted with local Japanese *boro* clothing producers, three of them also mentioned their early enthusiasm for Levi's jeans. Sasaki Mitsugu, a *boro* maker living in Sendai city and owner of the online store Sasaki-Yōhinten (Sasaki Shop) on Etsy, talked about his early passion for old fabrics. Sasaki grew up in the 1980s, and his vintage collection started with second-hand garments imported from America and Europe: the objects that impressed him the most were the Levi's jeans.<sup>26</sup> "Japan is an island and we really like something from outside. Many new things come from America, still now, and because it's so free-thinking. There is something about Americana style. It's so electric, so young."<sup>27</sup> This is a quote from Nakamura Hiroki, the founder of Japanese streetwear label Visvim, which has a strong focus on craftsmanship and classic American style. In 2014, Nakamura published a text on denim on the Visvim brand's website. In this "product introspection", Nakamura put a picture of a Levi's denim jacket next to a Japanese *noragi*: he suggested that these two types of garment were special because the fabric had meaning, and they were designed with a purpose, as workwear, rather than just for a certain "look".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sophie Woodward, "'Humble' Blue Jeans: Material Culture Approaches to Understanding the Ordinary, Global, and the Personal", in: Heike Jenss, *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p.42–57.

<sup>26</sup> Mitsugu Sasaki. Interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Sendai, Japan, 7 December 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Hiroki Nakamura. Biography, *Business of Fashion*, available at:

<https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/hiroki-nakamura>

<sup>28</sup> Hiroki Nakamura, "Product Introspection: Social Sculpture Denim", *Visvim*, 14 December 2009, available at: [https://www.visvim.tv/dissertations/product\\_introspection\\_social\\_sculpture\\_denim.html](https://www.visvim.tv/dissertations/product_introspection_social_sculpture_denim.html) [26 February 2020]





**Figure 4.** Early Levi's Type I jacket (Left). Japanese *noragi* (work jacket) (Right).

Workwear is one of the shared characteristics of denim jeans and *boro* clothing; they both began as work clothes, later becoming associated with contemporary youth culture, shaped by social, economic and other cultural factors. The functional “meaning” focused on by Nakamura provides another perspective from which to consider both denim and *boro* as uniforms of vintage style from different periods. For example, in the 1980s Japanese young people wore loose, dark, unfitted baggy clothes to pay tribute to Japanese designers’ triumph in Paris.<sup>29</sup> And now, wearing something *boro*-ish seems to be a new way of making a statement. In the case of Visvim, Nakamura mines the everyday-ness and humbleness of *boro* and denim. In the example shown below, Nakamura brings back the functionality of *boro*, making it into a *boro* down jacket. This reminds me of the original *boro* making and the maker’s intention of bringing warmth and protection to the body. Instead of patching vintage fabrics together for warmth, Nakamura’s *boro* jacket was instead filled with down. The outer materials are denim and hand-dyed indigo cotton, which maintains a balance between the durability and the *boro*-ness of the garment.

<sup>29</sup> Phyllis G. Tortora, and Sara B. Marcketti. "The Eighties and the Nineties: Fragmentation of Fashion 1980–1999", in: *Survey of Historic Costume* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2015), p.590–649.



**Figure 5.** Visvim Indigo Kerchief Down Jacket  
 Photograph courtesy of Hypebeast

The distressed texture of denim, as well as American hippie culture, has also influenced Japanese designers. Miller and Woodward noted in *Global Denim* that the distressed style developed in the United States during the 1970s is connected to hippie culture. This is because “nomadic and relatively impoverished hippies”, as the authors described them, made jeans the most customised and intimate item of clothing by “wearing them to death”, and letting the material disintegrate on their flesh.<sup>30</sup> For hippies, denim clothing was worn to destruction. The commercialisation of the hippie trend in American fashion may be seen as a prefiguration of the influence of hippie culture in Japan, where designers are now exploring new ways to recreate *boro*. I will discuss two Japanese labels, Kapital and Porter Classic, to elaborate on this topic.

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward, "Introduction", in: Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (eds.), *Global Denim* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), p.1-22.

Located in Kojima, the jeans manufacturing centre located in Okayama prefecture, folksy Japanese brand Kapital was established by Hirata Toshikiyo in 1984. The company originally operated a denim factory and became a fashion label a few years later.<sup>31</sup> Hirata Toshikiyo spent years teaching karate in the United States before deciding to set up the denim factory in Japan.<sup>32</sup> In 2002, Hirata Toshikiyo's son, Hirata Kiro, also returned to Japan after studying art in the United States, and began to design clothing for Kapital.<sup>33</sup> Unlike KUON, which focuses on vintage *boro* fabrics in the making of its garments, Kapital is constantly shifting themes and combining new materials and techniques with Japanese vintage textiles, and pre-distressed *boro* clothing designed with innovative techniques are sold through Kapital's sub-label Kountry.

In his sartorial experiments of cultural mixing, Hirata Kiro often blends *boro* and *sashiko* with contemporary fashion silhouettes and fabrication. In addition to this, Hirata introduces motifs from Western culture to his designs: two motifs used most frequently are the smiley face ideogram and the CND "ban the bomb" symbol (Figure 6). Figure 6 shows the Knit Boro Gaudy Cardigan from Kapital's 2019 Fall/Winter collection, a mixture of *boro* and modern knitting techniques. This *boro*-ish cardigan has motifs knitted into it, such as the CND symbol, polka dots, half-moons and a range of other squiggly lines and irregular shapes. In an interview with *GQ*, Hirata gave a short explanation about his adoption of hippie culture in his design approach, saying, "Hippie culture, so awesome".<sup>34</sup> This fusion of *boro* and counter-cultural symbols shows the influence of the designer's transcultural background. Hirata's approach to creating the new *boro* is to create a sense of cultural belonging through the fusion

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<sup>31</sup> James Smith, "Kapital History, Philosophy, and Iconic Products", *Heddels*, available at: <https://www.heddels.com/2018/05/kapital-history-philosophy-and-iconic-products/> [Accessed 11 May 2020]

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Noah Johnson, "Kapitalism", *GQ*, September 5 2019, available at: <https://www.gq.com/story/kapital-denim-is-a-japanese-paradise> [Accessed 11 May 2020]

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

of elements from different style tribes. In a globalised fashion context, the new *boro* is no longer customised only for Japanese wearers, and for Kapital it presents a bricolage of cultures.



**Figure 6.** Knit Boro Gaudy Cardigan.  
Photo courtesy of Hypebeast

Kapital's catalogues usually feature models from various ethnic groups, wearing mixed and matched styles, as shown in Kapital's 2016 Fall/Winter collection (Figure 7). No specific style tribes are directly referenced: the combination of various classic American hippie archetypes with Japanese textiles craftsmanship has blurred into a stereotype, a new style tribe. In this tribe, how the wearer dresses is not intended to convey allegiance to any specific cultural group: wearers can play with different identities simultaneously. Kapital's designs are developed into menswear and womenswear, and are accessorised with hats, scarves, bags, shoes and jewellery. The wearer can dress as a reggae singer wearing a kimono, or a bohemian

lady in a *sashiko*-embroidered shawl. The example of Kapital's approach shows how fashion has reconstructed *boro* into a nomadic style, by sourcing cultural symbols from America and creating an exaggerated culture clash using Japanese techniques and materials.<sup>35</sup> This new *boro* style targets people who appreciate Japanese craftsmanship and who also wish to present their individuality through clothes. Therefore, with indigo as a fundamental element in his design aesthetic, counter-cultural symbols are the patches that Hirata puts on Kapital's new, culturally mixed *boro* style.



**Figure 7.** Kapital Fall/Winter 2016 “Bad Opera” Collection. Photo by Eric Kvatek.

A cross-cultural background is a quintessential factor in shaping design styles, methods, and the ways designers interpret things. During my field trip to Japan in 2018, local Japanese artisans whom I interviewed often mentioned the brand Porter Classic as an early example of a fashion label that was reinventing *boro* with a modern appearance. The founders of Porter

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Classic, father and son designers Yoshida Katsuyuki and Yoshida Leo, exemplify another way in which designers are reinventing *boro* and translating it using global textile languages.

In 2007, well-known bag designer Yoshida Katsuyuki and his son Yoshida Leo established the brand with the aim of incorporating the slogans “Made in Japan” and “Global Design”,<sup>36</sup> promoting Japanese culture and craft while achieving a global appeal.<sup>37</sup> Porter Classic’s designs are characterised by a traditional Japanese indigo palette: the fading of the indigo blue dye over time creates a vintage appearance, as new uneven shades and irregular textures are continually revealed. Porter Classic is also experimental in its fabrication techniques: *sashiko* stitching is honoured and promoted in the brand’s seasonal “SASHIKO LOVE” global pop-up stores launched in 2015. As a basic stitching technique used to make *boro*, *sashiko* needlework has been discussed in Chapter One. Porter Classic incorporates Japanese *sashiko* and indigo into Western workwear as its fundamental design aesthetic.

Although Porter Classic is considered a *boro*-related brand, the term “*boro*” is barely referenced in the names of the items. Descriptions of the clothes are usually mixed with multi-cultural terms, seen, for example, in their Kendo/Sashiko French Jacket (Figure 8), Hawaiian Denim Pants, and African Cotton Chinese Jacket (Figure 9). *Kendogi* are jackets traditionally worn for the Japanese martial art *kendo* that involves swordsmanship with wooden or bamboo swords. The *kendo* jacket is made with very thick embroidered cotton to protect the wearer: in this case, *sashiko* needlework is essential in the *kendo* jacket to make the garment more durable and also decorative. By adopting traditional Japanese stitchwork and applying it to a peacoat silhouette, Porter Classic aims to create workwear that combines a Japanese textile tradition and Western fashion culture. This idea of mixing cultural elements is similar to the approaches of KUON and Kapital; however, compared with these labels, Porter Classic maintains a greater

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<sup>36</sup> Porter Classic, available at: <https://porterclassic.com/aboutus/> [Accessed 11 May 2020]

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Braddock Clarke, “In the Mix: Channelling Japanese Traditions for Contemporary Clothing”, *Selvedge*, 81 (March 2018), p.31.

emphasis on Japanese textile techniques than Kapital, and compared with KUON's *boro*-centred design principles, global design is the core of Porter Classic's design practice, through experimenting with more diverse materials and silhouettes.



**Figure 8.** Porter Classic Kendo/Sashiko French Jacket  
Photo courtesy of Porter Classic



**Figure 9.** African Cotton Chinese Jacket  
Photo courtesy of Porter Classic

When I was reviewing Porter Classic's brand profile and product categories, I had some concern about whether I should include it as a *boro*-inspired fashion label, even though it is often considered to be.<sup>38</sup> In an interview for the Japanese national daily newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*, Yoshida Katsuyuki expressed his strong interest in folklore studies, and when he encountered the *sashiko* technique in Aomori he was shocked by its history and the fortitude of its inhabitants in combating severe cold and poverty.<sup>39</sup> Yoshida was concerned that these precious clothes were disappearing, and that examples of those that were still in existence were only shown in museums. He had lived in Europe and New York in the 1970s, and through his family's bag company, Porter, he had had the chance to connect with local artisans who made hand-sewn items. The hand-sewn bags imported from European countries to Japan reminded him of Japan's own needlework heritage. Therefore, at the age of sixty, he decided to build a fashion brand that used Japanese *sashiko* and also embraced global design. The brand's slogans "Made in Japan" and "Global Design" correspond with the argument of this research: "*boro* is made in Japan and defined by global cultures".

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<sup>38</sup> Elva Pang, "Little Love from Porter Classic", *Obscura*, available at: <https://www.obscura-magazine.com/little-love-from-porter-classic/>. [Accessed 13 May 2020]

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*





**Figure 10.** Details of Porter Classic Kendo Sashiko Peacoat  
Photo courtesy of Porter Classic

Porter Classic's extensive use of indigo and *sashiko* design references the fundamental elements of *boro*, which enables an easy identification of the connection with the technique. This notion of "*boro*-inspired design" inspires me to reconsider the idea that denim culture influences new *boro*. There is of course a power relationship between the one *influencing* and the one *being influenced*. In Chapter One I discussed the revival of Japanese quilts as a result of American influence. And in Chapter Two, Amuse Museum's *boro* exhibition also implied that the revival of *boro* is based on its acceptance by the Western fashion. In this chapter, rather than saying that one culture brings change to another, it is more a situation in which they find cultural common ground which triggers cultural memories and builds connections between the two cultures. The similarities between Japanese *yosejire* and Western crazy patchwork, as well as those between Japanese *sashiko* and the Western running stitch, paved the way for the future development of Japanese quilts. In the discussion of denim and *boro*, I suggest that indigo is the bond connecting denim and *boro*: this makes *boro* particularly well suited to contemporary dressing practices.

Indigo has a historical significance in Japanese culture; meanwhile, it is also the signature palette of denim production. In Jennifer Balfour Paul's research, she suggests that the widespread wearing of denim could be connected to the ubiquitous use of indigo blue for textile dyeing in most areas of the world.<sup>40</sup> Kristin Neumüller and Douglas Luhanko also believe that the reason for the global popularity of jeans is its combination of cotton and indigo.<sup>41</sup> Indigo dyeing not only creates the ageing and fading effects but also strengthens the denim fabric. In addition, indigo is also referred to as "Japan blue", even though the indigo plants grow naturally in many countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, South America and Australia.<sup>42</sup> One reason for this assumption is the extensive use of indigo in Japanese people's daily life. In the book *Japan Blue*, Nakamura Miyuki traces the use of the term "Japan blue" to a historical reference, the British scientist R.W. Atkinson's visit to Japan in 1875. As Nakamura describes, Atkinson applied the term "Japan blue" to the indigo textiles he saw almost everywhere in Japan: "he admired the beautiful indigo dyeing then so common in Japan, in formal over-garments, workmen's jackets, padded jackets, kimono, hand towels, floor cushions, the curtains outside the entrances to shops."<sup>43</sup>

Whether indigo is called denim blue or Japan blue is not the salient issue here. This section intends to explore the cultural influence from America to Japan – indeed, denim culture has a significance in Japanese fashion history which clearly influences contemporary Japanese fashion design. However, the premise of this influence from denim culture to *boro* is based on existing connections. I will now discuss the refashioning of *boro* in a global design context, using images to highlight the fact that when the relationship of influence changes from Japanese *boro* to Western fashion, their connection, the colour of indigo, remains intact.

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<sup>40</sup> Jenny Balfour-Paul, *Indigo* (London: British Museum, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Kristin Neumüller and Douglas Luhanko, *Indigo: Cultivate, Dye, Create* (London: Pavilion, 2017), p.14.

<sup>42</sup> Miyuki Nakamura, *Japan Blue* (Tokyo: BNN, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

## Ragged Chic: Luxurious Boro

The clothes they sell are new but appear to have been previously worn, perhaps by someone who was shot or stabbed and then thrown off a boat. Everything looks as if it had been pulled from the evidence rack at a murder trial. I don't know how they do it. Most distressed clothing looks fake, but not theirs, for some reason. Do they put it in a dryer with broken glass and rusty steak knives? Do they drag it behind a tank over a still-smouldering battlefield? How do they get the cuts and stains so...right?<sup>44</sup>

In a 2016 article in *The New Yorker*, American author David Sedaris wrote about his personal encounter with the *boro*-inspired fashion brand Kapital. In his text, he dramatically expresses his curiosity and affection for these “new jackets with patches”. This created a paradox for him, because on the one hand Sedaris knew that these new garments that are distressed by hand are falsely “worn-out”. On the other, by looking at and touching the fabrics, the tactile experience of the worn qualities was also real. His account raises a question related to the authenticity of *boro* in today's fashion context. In addition to this, I explore the value creation process to understand how *boro* has become a luxury aesthetic in some cases and why it has failed in other situations.

As a tribute to the Levi's Type 1 Jacket, the Boro Spring First Jacket, shown in Figure 11, is Kapital's first piece made from vintage *boro* fabrics. In the product description, customers are reminded that this is a repurposed second-hand item, therefore the jackets will not be identical: they are all different from each other in certain ways.<sup>45</sup> Kapital was originally

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<sup>44</sup> David Sedaris, “The Perfect Fit: Shopping in Tokyo”. *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2016, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/28/david-sedaris-shops-for-clothes-in-tokyo> [Accessed 12/11/2019]

<sup>45</sup> Boro Spring First Jacket, product description. *Kapital*, available at: [https://www.kapital-webshop.jp/category/M\\_KOUNTRY/K2002LJ802.html](https://www.kapital-webshop.jp/category/M_KOUNTRY/K2002LJ802.html) [Accessed 12/11/2019]

a denim factory manufacturing replica of old American jeans. Designer Hirata Kiro expressed his ambition to create something original and timeless, like Levi's jeans: as he said, "because we were always experimenting and developing our denim processing techniques, what we were doing just become *boro* naturally over time."<sup>46</sup> Throughout this thesis, I explore this idea of "becoming *boro*" by investigating how it is constructed in different contexts. In this chapter, *boro* becomes a wearable object again, but no longer despised and humble. This Boro Spring First Jacket was originally priced at 130,680 Japanese Yen (approximately US \$1,222) and fetched \$2,200 on an online reselling platform.<sup>47</sup>



**Figure 11.** Kapital's Boro Spring First Jacket  
Photo courtesy of Kapital

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<sup>46</sup> Andy Thomas, "How an Ancient Japan Craft Became a Trend", *Mr Porter*, 9 May 2017, available at: <https://www.mrporter.com/en-gb/journal/fashion/how-an-ancient-japanese-craft-became-a-trend-736120> [Accessed 12/11/2019]

<sup>47</sup> "Kapital Boro Spring First Jacket", *Grailed*, available at: <https://www.grailed.com/listings/13552718-kapital-kapital-boro-spring-1st-jacket-xl>. [Accessed 20 May 2020]

According to Lou Taylor, poverty chic reached the level of couture design by the early 1990s, and she specifically pointed to the “worn out *boro sashiko* style that was embraced by designers.<sup>48</sup> In the chapter “Japanese Design” in the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, design historian Peter McNeil notes that “Comme des Carçons and Yohji Yamamoto shocked Western fashion writers when they introduced the *boro* look, a Japanese idea of a conscious destitution – perhaps even ugliness – that defied the Western desire to contour the body”.<sup>49</sup> The textile company NUNO, discussed in Chapter One, also brought the “aesthetics of *boro boro*” to the international textile design market in the 1990s, as Caroline Evans refers to in her writing on Rei Kawakubo and the “poor aesthetic”.<sup>50</sup> These two avant-garde designers were undoubtedly pioneers in embracing the *boro* aesthetic and challenging the canons of Western tailoring. In 2013, Kim Jones, then Louis Vuitton’s creative director, invited the design team from Kapital to collaborate on his 2013 Spring/Summer collection, heralding a return of “ragged style” at that year’s fashion week with several *boro*-inspired pieces (Figure 12).<sup>51</sup> As Jake Silbert has noted, this collection demonstrated that weathered denim and ragged clothing both had a place in high-end menswear.<sup>52</sup> In my interview with the Amuse Museum director Kiyoshi Tatsumi, he considered the exhibiting of this collection to be a turning point for the acceptance of *boro* by the fashion industry, and he also believed Jones’ inspiration from *boro* came from a visit to the *boro* exhibition at Amuse Museum.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Lou Taylor, “The Several Lives of a Collection of Rag Dump Clothing from Normandy (1900-55): From Farm to Dump to Poverty Chic” *Fashion Studies*, 1:1 (2018), p.23.

<sup>49</sup> Peter McNeil, “Asia in Europe: Japanese Design”, in: Lise Skov (ed.), *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: West Europe*, (Oxford: Berg, 2010), p.129–136.

<sup>50</sup> Caroline Evans, *Fashion from the Edge*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 249.

<sup>51</sup> Tim Blanks, “Louis Vuitton Spring 2013 Menswear”, *Vogue*, June 28, 2012 [online], available at: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2013-menswear/louis-vuitton> [Accessed 10 May 2019]

<sup>52</sup> Jake Silbert. “Five Times Kim Jones Brought Streetwear to the Runway.” *Hypebeast*, 18 Jan, 2018, available at: <https://hypebeast.com/2018/1/kim-jones-louis-vuitton-streetwear-high-fashion> [Accessed 10 May 2019]

<sup>53</sup> Kiyoshi Tatsumi, interview with Leren Li. Beijing Institution of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China. October 21, 2019.



**Figure 12.** Look from Louis Vuitton Spring 2013 Collection. Source: *Vogue*

In addition to the one at Amuse Museum, other museum exhibitions in Japan and overseas, along with the spread of publications and images via the internet, firmly established the concept of *boro* as a traditional Japanese patchwork of faded indigo made from recycled cotton textiles.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, fashion designers have been able to draw on and feature the *boro* aesthetic easily, without having to offer too much background information as explanation. In the years following the Louis Vuitton collection, *boro* as a style element was included in both luxury brands such as Chanel and Loewe and street fashion labels such as Greg Lauren, FDMLT and Beams.<sup>55</sup> An article in the *New York Times Style Magazine* on February 8, 2019,

<sup>54</sup> Marisa Bartolucci, “The Artful Remnant: A Rustic Textile Makes a Comeback”, *The International Design Magazine* (November 2005). p.66.

<sup>55</sup> Patchwork Le Boy Handbag from Chanel Spring 2015 Ready-To-Wear, *Vogue* [online], September 30, 2014, available at: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2015-ready-to-wear/chanel>. [Accessed 25 June 2020]

“LOEWE BLANKETS: 2018 LOEWE Salone Project”. [https://www.loewe.com/eur/en/loewe\\_blankets](https://www.loewe.com/eur/en/loewe_blankets). [Accessed 09/12/2020]

Jake Silbert, “Greg Lauren Deconstructs mastermind Japan’s Archive Pieces for FW19”, *Hypebeast*, November 13, 2019, available at: <https://hypebeast.com/2019/11/mastermind-japan-greg-lauren-apparel-collaboration-collection-fall-winter-2019>. [Accessed 25 June 2020]

showcased a series of *boro*-influenced looks by major fashion brand including Dior, Junya Watanabe, Etro, Fendi, Sou Sou Kyoto, Sophia Lerner and J.W. Anderson (Figure 13).<sup>56</sup> In the photo in Figure 13, two vintage *boro* jackets from Stephen Szczepanek’s Sri studio are mixed with other high fashion pieces, selling for \$2,400 and 4,800. In the Spring/Summer 2019 issue of the magazine *The Gentlewoman* magazine, the vintage patchwork and appliqué pieces were matched with current season items from Valentino, Stella McCartney and Loewe, and were described as the “very latest in luxury handcraft.”<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 13.** “Japanese-Inspired Denim”, *New York Times Style Magazine*.  
Photograph by Tom Johnson.

Keith Estiler, “FDMTL Spring/Summer 2018”, Hypebeast, 26 January 2018, available at: <https://hypebeast.com/2018/1/fdmtl-2018-spring-summer>. [Accessed 25 June 2020]

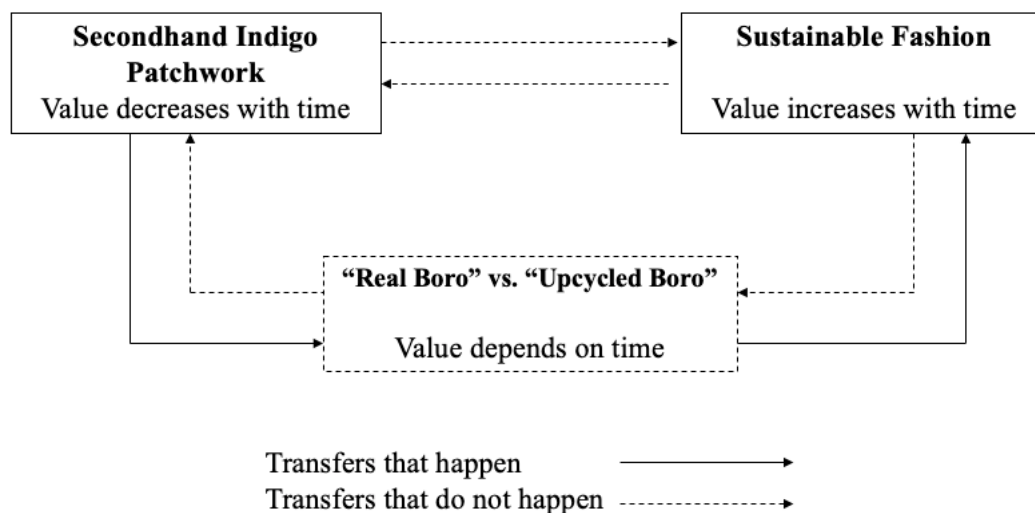
“BEAMS PLUS patchwork cotton cardigan”, *Mr. Porter*, available at: <https://www.mrporter.com/en-gb/mens/product/beams-plus/clothing/cardigans/patchwork-cotton-cardigan/14097096497500039>. [Accessed 25 June 2020]

<sup>56</sup> “In Fashion: Japanese Inspired Denim that’s Anything but Basic.” *The New York Times Style Magazine*. 8 Feb, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/08/t-magazine/japanese-inspired-denim.html> [Accessed 25 June 2020]

<sup>57</sup> “The Craft”, *The Gentlewoman*, 9 (Spring and Summer 2019), p.96.

Karen Bettez Halnon has explored how, in both Western fashion and popular fashion contexts, “poor chic” refers to an array of “fads and fashions that make recreational or stylish – and often expensive – ‘fun’ of poverty, or traditional symbols of working-class and underclass statuses.”<sup>58</sup> In the first section of this chapter, I used Jean Baudrillard’s concept of atmospheric values to read the contemporary “new *boro*” look as an expensive nostalgia. Creating meaning and values for poor chic and ragged style can also be explained by Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory. In Chapter One, I used this approach to analyse the process of the creation of value in *boro* through its transformation from used textiles with depreciating value to vintage fabrics with accumulating value. I now explore this theory further using examples from the fashion company KUON, by investigating how KUON produces new values by adopting the idea of being sustainable.

The diagram in Chapter One applies to the transformation of *boro*’s original status to a collectible and museum-grade object. Building on the discussions and the example that follows in the present chapter, here I will reframe the diagram.



**Figure 14.** Applying Rubbish Theory to explain the refashioning of *boro* through making it a symbol of sustainable fashion

<sup>58</sup> Karen Bettez Halnon, “Poor Chic: The Rational Consumption of Poverty”, *Current Sociology*, 50 (2002), p.501 DOI: 10.1177/0011392100205004002



Central to Rubbish Theory is the premise that for objects to move from the Transient category (in which their value decreases with time) to the Durable category (in which their value increases with time), there is a converting category of Rubbish that they have to pass through to radically recreate their value. When *boro* comes into the category of Rubbish in the fashion context, it is first considered as raw material in the production process, which assigns new value to it. Furthermore, as raw materials, *boro* can then be divided into more specific groups depending on their age. Through this classification, and the idea of the “appreciation of decay”, some *boro* become more valuable than the others, and when they are eventually made into “sustainable fashion” items, they will pass into another circle of value creation.

Within the category of Rubbish, *boro* can be divided in a number of ways in order to reassign different values according to their “age” and “quality”. In the diagram above I distinguished between “real *boro*” and “upcycled *boro*”, because these are the terms used in the following example of KUON’s work. Here I will focus on three types of fabrics used by KUON in their garment production to explain how *boro* receives its “aesthetic value” and “sustainable value” through the refashioning process.



**Figure 15.** *Boro* and upcycled *boro* fabrics by KUON  
Photo courtesy of KUON

The fabric on the left is normally considered as vintage *boro*, or “real *boro*” by the textile dealers, and has been acquired from rural households. The fabrics in the middle and on the right are known as “upcycled *boro*” by KUON: because they are made from relatively new scraps, the cost will be less than the vintage *boro* fabrics. The indigo fabric is made of cotton, and the black fabric is patched with worn-out silk. The price difference between the “real *boro*” and the “upcycled *boro*” can be demonstrated by two finished blazers: the one on the left is made from “real *boro*” and the other is made from black recycled silk. As Figure 16 shows, the “real *boro*” blazer sold for \$9,345, around five to six times more than the black silk one (\$1682). To rationalise the price, KUON explains to customers why it worth this much; the brand’s website states that:

Though these clothes are not something that anyone can afford, would you agree that in this age of impulse buying and consumerism, something that has lasted 100 years is the ultimate luxury? Why not take this opportunity to invest in one of our essential garments, that can only be made in limited numbers each year, and could be described as works of art.<sup>59</sup>



**Figure 16.** *Boro* Blazer (left), ¥1,000,000.  
Upcycled Silk Kimono Coaches Jacket (right), ¥180,000.

<sup>59</sup> Boro Blazer, product description, available at: <https://kuontokyo.myshopify.com/collections/new-arrivals/products/boro-blazer-a-large>. [Accessed 12/11/2019]

KUON separates the scraps into antique scraps and newer scraps, and states that “ageing is the ultimate luxury”. To rationalise this statement, KUON positions *boro* somewhere between fashion and art, which radically reassigns a new value to the “real *boro*”. To educate KUON’s customers in following their appreciation for decay, the brand also interprets “wearing *boro*” as both a sustainable investment and an act against consumerism in modern society. As mentioned in the first section, some of the needlework on the garments was done by the women artisans who were affected by the Japan Great East Earthquake in 2011. These fabrics, and the garments, are considered sustainable because the brand not only respects the environment by up-cycling the *boro* remnants, but also helps the producers to be financially independent and to rekindle their motivation for living. As Raphael Samuel argued in *Theatres of Memory*, retro chic began life as an anti-fashion, winning a cult following by enabling the return of the repressed.<sup>60</sup> Enthusiasm for retro chic was seen as a self-consciously minority taste – even a kind of eccentricity.<sup>61</sup> In this respect, KUON offers a good example of how retro chic can be constructed by transferring it from the category of Transient to that of Durable.

Today, the redesign of the new *boro* clothing is still trying to maintain a vintage *boro* look and emphasise traditional Japanese craftsmanship. However, the refashioning of *boro* does more than create replicas of it: as Lou Taylor suggests, *boro* becomes an “abstract aesthetic source” for design creativity.<sup>62</sup> For example, at the beginning of this chapter, I used an example of a denim patchwork blazer designed by Junya Watanabe for his 2015 menswear collection. Watanabe has incorporated a variety of new materials and techniques into the patchwork look. The deconstruction of denim has been featured in several seasons’ garments, and in the 2019 Spring womenswear collection Watanabe chose lace and feminine silhouettes

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<sup>60</sup> Raphael Samuel. *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. (London: Verso, 1994), p.201.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.204.

<sup>62</sup> Lou Taylor, “The Several Lives of a Collection of Rag Dump Clothing from Normandy (1900-55): From Farm to Dump to Poverty Chic” *Fashion Studies*, 1:1 (2018), p.28.

to replace the denim patches and unisex workwear aesthetic. In her review of this collection, the *Vogue* critic Sarah Mower called him a “reconstructionist” and suggested that his design for a lace and denim piece “patchworked Dior’s New Look and Madeleine Vionnet’s bias-cut dress.”<sup>63</sup> Mower’s referencing of these iconic Western fashion moments is evidence of the way that Western taste-makers impose their aesthetic on Japanese designers’ work: wearing patchwork can be luxurious, but it evokes a Western silhouette. By patching the garment with sophisticated, fragile lace fabrics, the luxurious *boro* dress is no longer about functionality or sustainability. As Deyan Sudjic notes, fashion is “the most developed form of built-in obsolescence”: it is a continual process of accepting and rejecting, and is the driving force of cultural change.<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 17 (left).** Junya Watanabe Women 2019 Spring Ready to Wear. Source: *Vogue*  
**Figure 18 (right).** Detail of Denim Mix Lace Coat by Junya Watanabe.  
 Photograph by Leren Li, 13 Jan 2019. Item displayed in Dover Street Market, London.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Mower, “Junya Watanabe Spring 2019 Womenswear “, *Vogue* [online], 29 February, 2018, available at: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2019-ready-to-wear/junya-watanabe> [Accessed 21 April 2020]

<sup>64</sup> Deyan Sudjic, “Fashion”, *The Language of Things*. (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p.165.

In terms of high fashion brands, and especially in their catwalk collections, designers have more space to play with their ideas and make what is in their imagination into reality. Also, with credit to the major fashion writers, reviews of these brands' collections in the press have normally been neutral and positive: even negative feedback is written in a relatively moderate tone. But for other brands, especially street fashion names, the views of consumers have been more straightforward, and sometimes very harsh. In 2016, the street brand C2H4 launched their "Re-Blue Project", which introduced two newly designed shoes that are a take on the classic silhouettes, the "Old Skool" and the "Authentic", of the footwear brand Vans (Figure 19). The "Old Skool" style shown below was priced at US\$315 and the other style at \$280. However, these were not a commercial success, and consumers expressed their confusion and sarcasm in online comments to the review:

"So \$280 for sharpied Vans?" "I love me some Vans but I ain't copping this shit!" "Uniquely garbage"; "These remind me of Visvim, the price as well." "Thanks for the idea: I'm going to make these and sell them independently." "Boro Vans? Shout out to that concept".<sup>65</sup>



**Figure 19.** C2H4 "Re-Blue Project" shoes, \$315  
Photograph courtesy of Hypebeast

<sup>65</sup> Helena Yeung, "C2H4 x Pros x Vans "Re-Blue Project" Revamps the Classic Old Skool and Authentic", *Hypebeast*, 13 August, 2016, available at: <https://hypebeast.com/2016/8/c24h-pros-vans-re-blue-project-old-skool-authentic>. [Accessed 24 May 2020]

With their limited production, partly hand-made production and quality, and their brand values, it is less controversial for high fashion brands put a high price on their garments, such as Junya Watanabe's £2,790 dress (Figure 17). But when high fashion elevates *boro* to a symbol of luxurious poverty chic, others will follow. However, for most brands that rely on mass production, hand-made *boro* is inevitably replaced by machine-made techniques. Consumers expect to see the craftsmanship that has always been embraced in *boro*, and in this case, these copied and expensively sold Vans shoes are not acceptable. Going back to Rubbish Theory, distinguishing "hand-made *boro*" from "machine-made *boro*" is another way to separate *boro* within the Rubbish "categories" and create different values for both of them. Even though, as one of the comments I quoted above asserts, these are "unique garbage".

Returning to the fake but authentic experience described by David Sedaris in the quote at the beginning of this section, the authenticity and value of *boro* in fashion come from the level of specialisation it embraces. The fundamental value of *boro*, as Chapter Two has already discussed, is the human care behind the fabric, a practice that "produces the object by a single subject for a single subject".<sup>66</sup> This exclusiveness is perhaps imitated by brands like Kapital and KUON that use vintage *boro* fabrics and artificially ragged clothing to create a sense of uniqueness and customisation. When I visited Kapital's store in Tokyo's Roppongi district, the first thing that caught my attention was the in-store studio where customers could watch the garment-making process. I could feel what Sedaris wrote about the "realness" when I saw someone physically touching and sewing the materials: it brought out the authenticity in the clothes. Paradoxically, the "fakeness" also came from the manipulation of fabrics by someone other than the wearer: because of the compressed time involved in creating it, the process of "becoming *boro*" disappears.

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<sup>66</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Style of Life", in: *The Philosophy of Money* [1900] (London: Routledge Classics, 2011), p.462.

While contemporary fashion designers try to transfer *boro* into the Durable category, making it into a timeless piece, as Georg Simmel pointed out, fashion's transitory character means that the process of a style or an appearance will naturally go through a cycle of rejection and acceptance.<sup>67</sup> Once it is widely accepted, the uniqueness and individuality of *boro* diminishes. In my interview with Tanaka Mitsuko, a *boro* maker who is aged over 70, and travels to sell her work in Kyoto's Tōji Temple on the 21<sup>st</sup> of every month, she gave her opinions on the refashioning of *boro*:

I have been knowing and doing it (*boro*) since I was a little girl. My mother made clothes like this for our families, and I followed her. Now I'm taking orders from other people, and they just send a request of what they want, a jacket, a handbag, or a hat. The customers only need to provide the sizes they want, and I will do the rest, including sourcing old fabrics, designing and sewing, all done by myself. I've been doing this for fifteen years, although I don't have a shop, people still find me through their own way. I don't know if it (*boro*) has become something fashionable, but some of my customers told me so. It's good to see people realise the beauty of this craft, but I don't make it for the reason of its popularity now. *Boro* is never dead, and if someone thinks it just came back in a sudden, I'm very sorry to say that's a misunderstanding.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Georg Simmel, "Fashion", *International Quarterly*, 10:1 (October 1904), p.130-155; "Fashion", *American Journal of Sociology*, 62, 1957 [*Philosophie der Mode*, Pan-Verlag, Berlin 1905].

<sup>68</sup> Mitsuko Tanaka. Interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Kyoto, Japan, 21/12/2017. Translated by Hongrui Li.



**Figure 20.** Handmade *boro* cape by Tanaka Mitsuko  
Photo by Leren Li

Evolving from mending craft to luxurious fashion items, *boro* is being commercialised in the way that fashion systems operate. Tanaka Mitsuko didn't put a "vintage fashion" tag on her clothes to sell them, she considered making *boro* clothes an ordinary and everyday clothing practice inherited from her mother. The comparison between Tanaka Mitsuko's work and previous examples in this chapter remind people how the interpretation and acceptability of the appearance of garments can be socially and culturally determined. For makers like Tanaka who have imbued their daily life with crafts making, *boro* might be a fad, but it is not suddenly back. As folk craft practice, *boro* has been carried on for a long time by makers and collectors with their own practices, and it is because of these long-standing practitioners that *boro* is being sustained and discovered now. Also, it is still important to note the influence from Western fashion that converts the traditional *boro* into new forms, and that has significantly transformed *boro* in recent decades. Refashioning *boro* includes the participation of both the fashion system and individuals. Moving from designing and selling, in the next section I will focus on domestic practitioners and their ways of refashioning *boro* as a lifestyle.



## **Practising *Boro* as a New Fashion**

Positioned between art and fashion, *boro* has returned to modern life via different paths: people see it in museums, wear it, and read it as aesthetics. Besides this, expert knowledge of *boro* and other aspects of Japanese textile history, and haptic knowledge, including experience gained from sewing, patching, and embroidery techniques, also play an important role in the refashioning process of *boro*. The resurgence of *boro* in fashion includes not only participants at the industry level, but also independent practitioners who are creating *boro* with their hands. In many cases it is the tactile experience of making that inspires people to create and encourages them to progress and become confident creative practitioners. From a practical perspective, *boro* as a repair technique is less essential today, but making *boro* has been given new meanings. The rest of this chapter focuses on examples of independent *boro* makers and *boro* communities to support the idea that practising *boro* is a continuation of the craft culture and expanded notions of what *boro* can become.

### **Independent *Boro* Makers: Exploring New *Boro* Expressions**

In October 2018, a few months before the close of Tanaka's *boro* exhibition, Amuse Museum held a Japan Vintage exhibition, inviting *boro* makers to join the five-day selling event in the museum (Figure 21). Exhibitors were invited to participate by bringing vintage *boro* that they had acquired or recent pieces they had made themselves. In December 2018, I interviewed one of the *boro* crafters, Fukayama Yumiko, at her temporary stall in the Japanese department store Tokyu Hands, located in Tokyo's Shibuya district. "It's more like a *boro* makers reunion event, almost everyone knows each other. Even though it's my first time meeting some of them face to face, I've followed their work on Instagram for quite a while,"<sup>69</sup> was how Fukayama described her impressions of the event at the museum.

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<sup>69</sup> Yumiko Fukuyama, interviewed by Leren Li. 6 December 2018, Tokyo.



**Figure 21.** Japan Vintage Exhibition, Amuse Museum  
Photograph courtesy of Yoshi Cho

Fukayama has been a professional acupuncturist for about twenty years. Known on Instagram as “boronote”, she started to post in 2014 to record her *boro* collection and other vintage items that she had been collecting for years. Now “boronote” has become a brand, Fukayama sells her own handmade *boro* clothes and accessories, and she is also a fabric supplier for the KUON fashion brand. Instead of using the Japanese word “lan lü (襤褸)”, she prefers to call her work “*boro*”, because in her opinion the term *boro* implies a broader range of items, not just fabrics or an item of clothing. “When I hear ‘lan lü’, there is a concrete image in my mind, something like a vintage kimono, but ‘*boro*’ sounds to more abstract, it can be many things.”<sup>70</sup> Although Fukayama reveals the openness of *boro*, *boro* makers who remain faithful to vintage fabrics have relatively limited options in terms of materials and colour choices. Therefore, they have to be more creative in designing their products in order to compete with others. Fukuyama showed me the *boro* braces she made for herself (Figure 22).

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 22.** Fukuyama Yumiko showing her *boro* brace  
Photograph by Leren Li

Instead of making clothes, which is very time consuming, independent makers have focused on creating accessories and other small items. By doing small-scale work, these *boro* crafters are able to balance quality and quantity in their products. They still keep a sense of “authenticity” through handmade and vintage fabrics, and meanwhile it is easier to sell the items at acceptable prices. Another strategy is specialising in particular products to quickly establish a reputation in the market. For example, the *boro* maker Okuno Ryuichi mentioned in Chapter One is known for his *boro* tote bag designs. Kami Hitoe is another *boro* crafter who specialises in creating *boro* shoes (figure 23).



**Figure 23.** *Boro* shoes made by Kami Hitoe  
 Photograph by Leren Li

An important thread running through my conversations with the *boro* makers is the relationship between their life experiences and the ways they interpret these in their work. The shoes shown above were made by my first interviewee, Kami Hitoe, who is a prosthetic limb designer living in Chiba city. In December 2017 we met at the warehouse store of his friend Oguni Omokaze, who collects discarded clothes in Japan and sells them to buyers in Pakistan. Kami Hitoe started designing prosthetic legs in 2014, and in 2015 he began his *boro* shoe making practice. Designing for the disabled drove his *boro* practice, as he describes: “disabled people have very limited choices of shoes, so I want to make something for them. At that time, I also worked part time at another vintage shop, and I watched people trying to pick up newer clothes from piles of second-hand ones. That’s interesting, you see people favouring of the newness, even if they know those clothes are discarded by someone else. And those distressed and unwanted clothes somehow trigger my imagination of the word ‘disabled’. If

they are disabled garments, I think maybe I can do something for them too.”<sup>71</sup> Drawn from his work experience as both a prosthetic limb designer and a part-time mender, Kami Hitoe interprets making as continuous repairing work, and he reads newness and oldness as interchangeable ideas rather than stable statuses. In Hirata Kiro’s quote discussed earlier in this chapter, he also challenges the binary definitions of old and new by describing *boro*’s making process as a gradual becoming. Kami Hitoe’s work blurs the boundaries between the newness and the oldness, between mending and making. In the book *Visible Mending*, social anthropologist Sarah Pink also discusses mending as a form of making in her analysis of the differences between a maker and a mender.<sup>72</sup> Thinking about making as an ongoing process that is constantly remaking itself could provide a new perspective to the sustainable approaches and reshape the relationship between materials and human beings.

Kami Hitoe provides insight into what the refashioning of *boro* might offer, beyond being a retro style or a revived tradition. He didn’t talk much about fashion or refashioned *boro*: the drivers for his *boro* practice in a greater sense come from his intimate life experience. Practising *boro* in today’s context is less function-oriented, and it is not just about “things”. In his writing about craft making in today’s context, David Gauntlett argues that the notion of craft has been extended into different spheres of life, and an engagement in crafting satisfies people, as it can remind us that we can make a difference.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Kami Hitoe’s *boro* shoe making, the notion of “disabled” clothing links the activity of practising *boro* to a reclaiming of life. Making *boro* is making experiences: it’s more about self-reflection on what are we doing when we make *boro* today.

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<sup>71</sup> Kami Hitoe, interviewed by Leren Li. 24 December 2017. Chiba, Japan. Translated by Yamaguchi Rena.

<sup>72</sup> Sarah Pink, “Prologue: Repairing as Making,” in Steven Bond, Caitlin DeSilvey and James R. Ryan, *Visible Mending: Everyday Repairs in the South West* (Axminster, Uniform Books, 2013) p.13.

<sup>73</sup> David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p.58.

In her research into the resurgence of folk techniques and approaches in fashion, Amy Twigger Holroyd considers the emergence of a wave of independent producers to be a significant change in contemporary folk-inspired fashion. One result of this change is the increase in the variety of materials, patterns and DIY instructions for makers.<sup>74</sup> Many of my interviewees agreed that making *boro* is a rather intuitive activity, but *boro* kits and workshops have still become popular globally. On 9<sup>th</sup> May 2019, I attended a small exhibition of artist Celia Pym's darning work hosted by the clothes shop TOAST in Notting Hill, London. When we were sharing our experience about repairing techniques, she asked me a question: "how should I teach people to make *boro*?"<sup>75</sup> The reason for her question is because she was asked by another shop to lead a "*boro* workshop" there, but she had no clue about how to guide people in making *boro*, or even whether it is necessary to have a *boro* teacher for the activity.

A year earlier, in the same location, TOAST had held a "Boro Workshop" during London Craft Week, collaborating with Ray Stitch, a haberdashery shop which offers a programme of sewing classes. I registered as a participant, to watch and physically experience a *boro*-making class. There were about twenty people in my session, and we were offered sewing supplies and tools, as shown in Figure 24. Except for the general needlework tools (pins, scissors and threads), the workshop provided us with leftovers from the fabrics used for TOAST's clothes, *sashiko* needles, Claire Wellesley Smith's book *Slow Stitch*,<sup>76</sup> some examples of *boro*, such as the swatch books (on the right of Figure 24) and coin bags (on the left of Figure 24).

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<sup>74</sup> Amy Twigger Holroyd, *Folk Fashion. Understanding Homemade Clothes* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p.39.

<sup>75</sup> Celia Pym, "Mend Project", *TOAST*, <https://www.toa.st/magazine/celia-pym-mend-project.htm>. [Accessed 19 June 2020]

<sup>76</sup> Claire Wellesley Smith, *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art* (London: Batsford, 2015)



**Figure 24.** *Boro* workshop supplies and tools, TOAST. Photograph by Leren Li

There were three *boro* sessions that day, and each session lasted one hour. Participants had been notified that they were welcome to bring their own clothes and repair them during the event. As well as a quick review of *boro* as heavily patched domestic textiles from Japan, visible mending and everyday repair was the key information that the instructor tried to emphasise. Whether this was to repair a frayed edge of a sweatshirt (Figure 25) or simply to make a *boro*-ish T-shirt, adding a layer of fabric and using running stitches to reinforce something was the most common technique we were offered. To achieve the “*boro*-ish” effect, most of the selected fabrics were in indigo and cut into rectangular patches.



**Figure 25 (left).** A *boro* workshop participant with her distressed sweatshirt.  
**Figure 26 (right).** A *boro* workshop participant's patch sewn on her T-shirt.

Because of the very limited time, most participants couldn't finish their work. In my later interview with the workshop instructor, Octavia Kingsley, her definition of *boro* was "making a feature of stitches in the mending of fabrics." This definition would easily connect to the technique of darning, as both *boro* and darning are involved with heavy stitchwork. The difference is that darning uses stitches to create a new warp and weft, while stitching on *boro* is mainly used to reinforce another layer of fabrics. This difference also explains the popularity of *boro*; as Kingsley says: "*boro* is so easy!"<sup>77</sup> Kingsley didn't consider herself to be a *boro* teacher, but she wasn't worried about leading a *boro* workshop: as she explained, *boro* is "a simple running stitch and loading several stitches at once makes it very straightforward."<sup>78</sup> In the *boro* workshops, beginners, including myself, would quickly see the outcome of what we created and get a sense of achievement. Figure 27 shows the still unfinished work that I made

<sup>77</sup> Octavia Kingsley, interviewed by Leren Li via email. 2 November 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



after the *boro* workshop with TOAST's fabrics. I didn't create a coin bag, as the workshop suggested we try, because it might still be thrown away. By calling this piece a "patchwork patch", I hope to patch it onto something else, maybe my other bags. Although it looks useless now, I watch it and think about what it can be. It never needs to be a finished piece, because *boro* can never be finished: as this thesis has been addressing, the essence of *boro* is becoming.



Figure 27. A *sashiko* patch made by Leren Li.

### ***Boro* Communities: Shared Knowledge and Co-creation of Meanings**

In Tokyo, American Amy Sylvester Katoh is recognised for her dedication to discovering talented artisans and preserving rapidly disappearing traditional rural crafts. In an article in *The New York Times* in 1994 writer Paula Deitz called Amy Katoh "an American defender of ancient rural crafts in Japan".<sup>79</sup> Katoh is an author, *boro* collector and businesswomen, and her 43-year-old shop Blue & White, in Tokyo, has been the showcase for

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<sup>79</sup> Paula Deitz, "Ancient Rural Crafts of Japan Have an American Defender", *The New York Times*, May 19, 1994.

a wide range of craftspeople's work. As she said in our interview, after more than forty years of living in Japan she only has eyes for blue.<sup>80</sup> As an American living in Japan for over fifty years, Katoh plays a role as a mediator through *boro*, building a bridge between an older textile culture and modern society within and outside Japan. She writes and self-publishes books about *boro* and her personal reflection on aspects of Japanese aesthetics such as *mottainai*. After hearing about my field trip journeys and people I've talked to, Katoh told me that she had connections with many of them, including Morita Tadashi, Stephen Szczepanek and Kei Kawasaki, the key writers who have been publishing books on *boro* globally. In describing their relationships, Katoh didn't use the word "competitor": as she added, the "*boro* world is very small, you see everyone knows each other, and sometimes they even recognise each other's collection, because collectors have different tastes, there's no good or bad taste, it's just personal preference. People are super friendly. Stephen used to send me photos of his newly collected *boro*. And me too, when I have something I'm not sure about, I will bring my pieces to Morita-san's shop and consult him. He is the king of the *boro* world."<sup>81</sup> The craft world, as David Gauntlett describes, is different from the art world, and is a place that doesn't prioritise fame and comparative status among peers.<sup>82</sup> Knowledge sharing has been an important part of the crafting culture, for both collectors and crafters. Blue and White is a physical space for crafters to sell their work and for holding workshops for amateurs and other activities to bring makers together.

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<sup>80</sup> Amy Sylvester Katoh. Interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Tokyo, Japan, 4/12/2018.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Gauntlett, p.66.



**Figure 28.** Blue and White Shop, Tokyo  
Photograph by Leren Li

Drawing from the example of TOAST’s workshop, *boro* is a practice-based, rather than a “teachable” activity. There is no expert in *boro* making, which creates freedom and also makes mutual learning more crucial. From her interviews with home sewing practitioners, Amy Twigger Holroyd emphasises the significance of a supportive community which helps enthusiasts to make progress and build confidence.<sup>83</sup> With the global interest in *boro*, the internet has become the major channel to connect makers and involve enthusiasts in conversations. In her research on quiet activism and the new amateurism, Fiona Hackney suggests that online crafting offers the “new amateurs the freedom to experiment with unusual juxtapositions, perform an imagined self, and take risks”.<sup>84</sup> Other reasons for the popularity of online crafting platforms, as Rob Walker analysed in his case study of Etsy, are its less commercial focus, which is associated more with participation and social and communal

<sup>83</sup> Holroyd, p.44.

<sup>84</sup> Fiona Hackney, “Quiet Activism and the New Amateur: The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts”, *Design and Culture*, 5:2 (2013), p.175.

values.<sup>85</sup> Hackney also notes that “communication technology and embracing social media is a significant aspect of crafting culture.”<sup>86</sup> Online platforms, especially social media and image-focused platforms, are where many *boro* makers’ first encounter with *boro* happens. In the online *boro*-making community, people are not only supported by the technical knowledge posted by other crafters, but are also emotionally supported by fellow enthusiasts. Lindsey Gradolph, whose knowledge and practice of *boro* is closely connected to her crafting comrades on social media, will provide insight on this topic of online knowledge co-creation.

The freedom to post work and share knowledge on social networks boosts people’s engagement, especially that of amateur craft makers. In December 2018, I interviewed Lindsey Gradolph (known in the Instagram *boro* world as Lindzeanne), an English teacher who has been living in Japan for ten years. As a *boro*- and *sashiko*-inspired accessory maker, the number of Gradolph’s Instagram followers had grown to over 20,000 within a year of starting to post her work in 2017. Gradolph collects vintage Japanese fabrics and second-hand jeans, which she cuts into pieces and patches together to create brooches, pendants and other small accessories (Figure 29). Gradolph described herself as “not a big social media person”, “from a non-craft background”. She stated, I “simply enjoy the feeling of touching things more than just painting”.<sup>87</sup> Her exploration of Japanese textile culture began when she followed other textile artists on Pinterest and Instagram. For artisans who may not have received formal art and design education, online communities provide people at different levels with equal opportunities and lower entry barriers to demonstrate their creativity and learn from each other.

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<sup>85</sup> Rob Walker, “Handmade 2.0”, *The New York Times*, 16 December 2007, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/magazine/16Crafts-t.html>. (Accessed 18 December 2019).

<sup>86</sup> Hackney, p.183.

<sup>87</sup> Lindsey Gradolph. Interview by Leren Li. Personal Interview. Tokyo, Japan, 3/12/2018.



**Figure 29.** Lindsey Gradolph’s hand stitched pendants and brooches made from second-hand denim and vintage fabrics. Displayed in the Blue and White shop in Tokyo. Photograph by Leren Li

In my interview with Gradolph, I asked her to talk about what *boro* is to her, and she didn’t give me an exact answer right away. One week after the interview, I saw that she had used my question in her latest post on Instagram, “I was recently asked by someone ‘what is *boro* to you?’” Here, she also gave her answer, “*boro* isn’t just indigo and *sashiko*, it’s about making do and repurposing ‘waste’ with intent and care, and it epitomises thrift, reusing and a never-ending textile story.”<sup>88</sup>

Gradolph is an example of Fiona Hackney’s “super-connected amateur”, who may not have received professional training, and is informed by a wide range of resources – in Gradolph’s case online platforms – to contribute to an expanded knowledge.<sup>89</sup> Under Gradolph’s Instagram post, people posted their own definitions of *boro*: “*boro* refreshes today’s throwaway mentality and the unending desire for consumerism’s need for something

<sup>88</sup> Lindsey Gradolph, “I was recently asked by someone ‘what is boro to you?’” *Instagram*. December 11, 2018. [Accessed February 15, 2019]

[https://www.instagram.com/p/BrPl\\_DKnY3i/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_button\\_share\\_sheet](https://www.instagram.com/p/BrPl_DKnY3i/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet)

<sup>89</sup> Hackney, p.183.

new where little value is placed on repurposing and reviving what we already have.” “*Boro* epitomises thrift, reusing and reworking, a never-ending textile story. It is such an important aesthetic in our fast-paced world.” “*Boro* is a way to represent symbolically both personal and collective resilience.” “I love the meditative nature of the stitches, and the way a fabric slowly emerges from little pieces of the past. I also like to think about the different kinds of work that have a similar origin like *kesa* and quilting and reflecting on how they evolve slightly differently. *Boro*’s association with indigo is a big factor in its favour I reckon – always such a beautiful colour.” “Thank you all for sharing and opening up the idea of *boro* to me. I’ve learnt something new through this and will treasure my fabrics more in the future.”<sup>90</sup>

This collective activity, from the pause in the conversation to the later answer she posted on Instagram and her followers’ replies, was the moment that made me feel that I am part of this *boro* community and part of the creation of its meaning. This is because we both have reflections on each other’s words, and we are spreading our reflections to our own audience – Gradolph to her followers on Instagram, and I to the readers of my research. This project has been developed following a rhizomatic structure, as I have explained in the introductory chapter. This Deleuzian term “rhizome” well describes a ceaseless connection between any points to any others: it is not like a tree or root structure, with a fixed order. I did not expect that Gradolph would post her reflection and involve her followers in this project: it was yet another example of “becoming *boro*”: the meaning of *boro* is constantly emerging, and in the co-creation process there is no one fixed meaning.

Gradolph’s action also explains what she said in our interview about how online space made her feel less anxious about expressing herself. When she talked about her life in Japan and how she found *boro*, she mentioned a certain cultural anxiety as an American living in a country with tremendous cultural differences. She has always been aware of the rich textile

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<sup>90</sup> Replies from @wenjoyart, @ricartosamaria, @1954jennyjo, @horspools2800, @zoecurious

culture in Japan, and she was also quite interested in it. However, she hesitated to explore it because she still felt like a cultural outsider, until she started to interact with virtual communities, in her own language and with less social stress. In today's cross-cultural exchanges, social media has incomparable advantages in terms of its communicative efficiency, lower cost, cultural diversity, and cohesion within communities. It also corresponds to the connection and heterogeneity from the six principles that Deleuze employs to explain the notion of the rhizome.<sup>91</sup> The rhizomatic space of social media connects international *boro* enthusiasts to co-create a "global *boro*". In the case of Gradolph, an American maker living in Tokyo, and me, a Chinese student studying London, the rhizome of knowledge co-creation was formed when we met and produced a new definition of *boro* that then spread to an online *boro* community and received new answers via Instagram.

## Conclusion

This chapter is about *boro*'s living history, which is still in the process of influencing people's lives and being socially and culturally recreated. In the evolution of *boro* today, fashion has become the most popular and straightforward way of achieving a cultural continuity and also to revitalise *boro* as an ancient craft tradition into a more contemporary form. The revival of *boro* has not happened coincidentally: it was a response to changes in the social climate both within Japan and globally. As the examples in Chapter Three demonstrate, *boro* has been accepted and displayed in sophisticated fine art and design spaces, which fashion has always referenced visually. In the fashion world, the rise of vintage culture is the foundation of the construction of "new *boro*" style.

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<sup>91</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.6.

However, the acceptance of “new *boro*” as fashion in Japan is not simply due to the shift in attitude towards “rags”, but also relies on the global vintage fashion phenomenon. The first section analysed the factors that enabled vintage fashion to become widely adopted in Japan – economic recession, a desire for individuality, nostalgia, and Japanese consumers’ growing fashion confidence. In previous discussions of *boro* textiles within the context of the antiques and fine art fields, “vintage” referred to old, heavily repaired *boro* fabrics. In this chapter, “vintage” indicates a look of “*boro*-ness” rather than actual second-hand clothes. To create a vintage look of “*boro*-ness”, Junya Watanabe has incorporated indigo-dyed cottons and a *boro* reinforcing technique in his collections, and KUON’s designer Ishibashi has elevated the vintage look to the status of cultural heritage after displaying the newly made *boro* jacket in a museum space.

As an important symbol of vintage culture, American denim culture was popularised in Japan in the 1990s and it now gives *boro* a new aesthetic reference. Two Japanese designers were discussed in this research: Nakamura Hiroki, from Visvim, and Hirata Kiro, from Kapital. Nakamura incorporates everyday-ness and functionality into a *boro* down jacket, while Hirata references the influence of hippie culture via denim clothes and infuses cultural symbols from America into an exaggerated, culturally mixed *boro* style. In the discussion of “*boro*-inspired design” and “denim-inspired *boro* design”, I argue that the relationship between the one *influencing* and the one *being influenced* is based on cultural common ground and connections rather than the hierarchical power relationship.

In the third section, I explored how fashion constructs *boro* pieces as a luxury item and *boro*’s authenticity within the context of fashion. Using the example of KUON’s “real *boro*” jacket and the Rubbish Theory framework, I described how the brand transfers vintage *boro* fabrics from depreciating value to appreciating value by regrouping the raw materials and ascribing new values according to their age and storied history. In another example, Junya



Watanabe fundamentally breaks the stereotyped *boro* look by adopting a feminine silhouette with fragile lace fabrics. Unsuccessful cases are also discussed, through public reactions to the copies and pieces sold, that demonstrates a constant pursuit for craftsmanship in people's expectations of *boro*: even just a sense of customisation can make the wearer feel they are unique.

The final section focuses on my interviews with *boro* makers, teachers and the community of makers, including my own participation in *boro* practice and the co-creation of knowledge. There is a niche market for independent *boro* makers to promote their creative work, but “doing *boro*” is also a way for them to express themselves and reflect on their life experiences. As making *boro* has become a popular part of DIY culture, toolkits and classes are now provided to make *boro* more accessible and imaginative. The unregulated nature of *boro* gives people more freedom to play with the materials and create their own interpretations of *boro*. At the same time, *boro* connects people in both online and offline space. Although *boro* as a cultural symbol is exclusive to Japan, “doing *boro*” is not. Through sharing and mutual learning, people with different cultural backgrounds are co-producing new meanings and values for this ever-changing notion of “*boro*”.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

This project was born out of my interest in patchwork and a desire to share and explore that interest more widely. I began practising making patchwork garments when I was doing my Masters degree in fashion studies at Parsons School of Design. I was immediately attracted by *boro* when I was searching for some patchwork inspirations for a project with the clothes I bought from charity shops. Although *boro* was described as exclusive to Japan in most texts I found at that time, I had a strong feeling that *boro* was also familiar in my own culture of China. It made me wonder whether there were perhaps reciprocal influences between Chinese patchwork and Japanese *boro*, or even between *boro* and other cultures. With my very basic tacit knowledge, I know how to patch and make *boro*, while the aim of this research was to answer the question: what is *boro*? And what makes *boro* a global cultural phenomenon across the fields of art, design and fashion? What are people doing when they “do *boro*”? In the “renaissance” of *boro*, there has been a process of constructing meaning and value through dynamic relationships between different agencies, and this research has aimed to articulate these transformations in *boro*, placing *boro* in the context of a global network, from its history told by historians and folklorists to its recent application in the worlds of art, design and fashion.

Today, *boro* is still actively involved in a variety of creative practices, and I believe it will be endowed further, with more imagination. I hope this research will bring further academic attention to *boro* and set the stage for future explorations of the upper case *Boro*. As a revived craft that is still being continually re-explored in various fields and cultures, the definition and interpretation of *boro* are endless, and the connectedness of cultures will continue. I conclude that the refashioning of *boro* enables contemporary art and design practitioners to generate possibilities for understanding the value of the “unvalued”, and encourages us to reconsider the formation of a certain cultural phenomenon as a continuously transforming process that involves various cultures rather than a singular, isolated one.

## Articulating Dimensions of *Boro*

This thesis opens up conversations about *boro* in the first chapter by contextualising *boro* within the transcultural nature of patchwork. I first deconstruct the idea of *boro* into several dimensions, from the general culture of patchwork to shifting definitions of Japanese patchwork, the evolution of Japanese quilts and the global promotion of Japanese *mottainai* aesthetics. Through investigating these elements that constitute *boro*, I further explored the idea of *Boro* produced by less conventional materials and methods, leading the subsequent research to consider not only what *boro* is but also what *boro* can be.

When *boro* was first exhibited at the ABC Gallery in Ōsaka in 2000, curator Nukata Kousaku described it as an “accidental beauty” which was expressed through the humble, unpretentious, cast-off rag. And when the term “*boro*” was first used internationally in the exhibition curated by Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada at the Museum of Crafts and Folk Art in San Francisco, Wada interpreted *boro* as an example of Japanese vernacular aesthetics where there were no rules to follow other than to instinctively uphold the basic purpose of mending, using only the limited materials that were available. Since then, *boro* has gradually become a popular and collectible item in the Western antiques market. With increasing exposure in art institutions and the media, the price of *boro* rose, and it was celebrated as Japanese cultural heritage, as a textile diary of history, and as a testament to the beauty of Japan.

To assert the cultural origins of *boro*, in 2007 *boro* was displayed in Tokyo’s Amuse Museum, which has been referred to by some tourists as a “*boro* museum”. This continuous display of a *boro* collection over ten years aimed to construct *boro* as a cultural symbol that makes a unique claim about Japan in the twenty-first century. Although the museum’s *boro* display was devoted to one collector’s *boro* collection, and some of the narratives carried a misleading message that conveyed the notion of *boro* as a regional folk craft, the exhibition,

with evocative associations, subtly dissolved geographical boundaries and produced a sense of cultural “we-ness” through the idea of “Japanese blood”.

Beyond articulating the diverse values and meanings attributed to *boro*, and the narratives to which *boro* has contributed through museum exhibitions and the global antiques and art market, I have also discussed the acceptance of *boro* in the fashion world and the recreated *boro* made by independent *boro* makers as part of a cultural continuity. Refashioning *boro* is a process of cultural mixing rather than isolation, and provides an aesthetic framework for creative practitioners to produce “new *boro*” using contemporary design languages. The fashion system commercialises *boro*, while practising *boro* liberates it. As an individual or a group practice, *boro* is a way to express identity and generate new possibilities through sharing and co-creating knowledge in both virtual and physical communities.

Over this cultural journey of *boro*, I consider myself an observer to record how people apply their creative intelligence and collective emotions to give meanings to *boro*. Among these ever-changing interpretations, care has always been the core value of *boro*. The recipients of care used to be between family members, and now it is transformed into a symbolic idea; the care value behind the intensive stitches has been passed into the hands of contemporary crafts makers. Instead of caring for and protecting family, making *boro* today has its modern applications, echoes the social agenda on sustainability and reminds us to care about the outside world. It exemplifies a Japanese way to consider sustainable living through appreciating what we have owned and extending the object’s lifecycle by repairing. In his book *Fewer Better Things*, Glenn Adamson reminds readers that fine craftsmanship is important to make the owner appreciate the object, but an object doesn’t need to be finely crafted in order to be cherished.<sup>1</sup> People who couldn’t afford luxury objects still have things to care about once they build meaningful connections within the objects. And this intention of finding values in the

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Fewer, Better Things*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.184-186.

valueless is an important factor in the recreation of *boro* and reviving repair culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Adamson also notices that a type of hardscrabble lifestyle is spread and practised much easier in cities compared to the countryside, because of the huge amount of waste in urban setting. Following his observation, he argues that to reshape our society to be more sustainable and humane, finding down-to-top solutions will be more effective than luxury production offered by companies and brands. The care values of *boro* could help people to think about the convergence between sustainability and humanity in a more intimate and lighter way. Even though it's not made for necessity, it's more like a practice in everyday life at a community level, rather than a product determined by the industry. As Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark argue, studying the everyday and ordinary provides us empirical evidence to broaden the definition of fashion.<sup>2</sup> Thinking of *boro*'s origin, it stands for a unique way of valuing things, which doesn't involve an exchange of money, but the sentimental attachment with human care. *Boro* also connects us metaphorically to a living experience so far away from us that we could only imagine. This might explain *boro*'s popularity outside of Japan, where it could be understood as an untapped resource of significance. Today, *boro* is precious not because of what it is, but because of what it represents: awe of nature, the value of care and hope, Japanese ethnicity and a new form of repair culture and aesthetics.

In the discussions about care value, it's inevitable that gender and power relations are infused into care discourses. In this thesis, the work of women collectors, scholars and creative practitioners is discussed to fill the voids in the *boro* narratives of the male-dominated high art field. Through the field observations in this project, male dealers are noted to still be the dominant power in the global *boro* market. They contribute their textile and business

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<sup>2</sup> Hazel Clark, "Slow + Fashion – Women's Wisdom", *Fashion Practice*, 11:3, 319, DOI: [10.1080/17569370.2019.1659538](https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2019.1659538)

knowledge to build a value system of *boro*, ranging from antique markets to high art space. In comparison, women participate less in the markets, and more attention is drawn to exploring stories of female conditions and expressions of feminine experience through making, exhibiting and writing. Thinking of the first *boro* exhibition overseas organised by Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, the first *boro* collected by V&A from Kawasaki Kei, the active writer and collector Amy Katoh, and the female participants from *boro* workshops to the online space, such feminine work underpins the evolution of *boro* from lower case to upper case. It regenerates more meaningful, sustainable, therapeutic, and pleasurable narratives and sets out a new critical discourse and practice of *boro* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this project, exploring different roles people play in the *boro* world is not to claim that this field is specifically gendered. On the opposite, it draws attention to the inclusive and decentralised space formed in the process of constructing “*Boro*”. There isn’t an absolute authority to decide the value of *boro*, because its definition varies in this rhizomatic network. Making *boro* is no longer female stitchery work; as the examples of male *boro* makers discussed in this thesis, men also actively participate in the redesigning *boro* practice. Some interviewees in my research play multiple roles at the same time. For example, Okuno Ryuichi, the *boro* maker mentioned in Chapter One, not only makes tote bags, but he also collects, sells, and publishes articles in magazines. In my conversations with the interviewees, each of them could be a centre of ideas surrounded by their unique knowledge and network systems. Therefore, researching the redesigned *boro* gives us a new frame of reference for a maker’s relationship with materiality and their own interpretations as an inherent part of the design process. And the study of *boro* demonstrates the importance of researching objects as documents of attitudes and value construction, it also presents an exchange between different agencies and theoretical positions, rather than a linear narrative. I’ve addressed the multi-dimensional approaches to reinvigorate the ideas of *boro* throughout this thesis through a range

of aspects of contemporary life: cultural politics, gender, ethnicity, aesthetics, sustainability and the interrelationship among art-design-fashion. This project is about opening more possibilities for readers to thinking and questioning the formation of certain “traditional craft” with more transcultural considerations. By articulating the dimensions of *boro*, I try to outline some theoretical approaches to this widespread but under-researched cultural phenomenon. I also hope this research could give rise to future conversations, and this piece of work is one amongst many.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

I intend this research to fill the gaps in the existing writing on *boro* and to extend the history of *boro* by engaging with the study of contemporary creative practices in art and design and the fashion industry. Following the cultural journey made by *boro* from Japan to other countries, I collect, reflect, and re-evaluate the co-creation of the concept of *boro* through transcultural knowledge and material exchange, to propose the idea that *boro* is physically made in Japan, but conceptually defined by other cultures.

Regarding the idea of co-creation, the inverted research between Tokyo and Aomori, as well as the aesthetic appreciation of *boro*, are two examples which elaborate the process. Through interviews and field trips to different cities in Japan, and to other countries, I noticed the inconsistent information regarding the origin of *boro* and questioned the claim that Aomori was the original locus of *boro* making. To justify my argument, I conducted further research based on my visit to the alleged birthplace of *boro*, and reconstructed the knowledge of *boro* making with a more comprehensive understanding of the geography, history and cultural context of Aomori. In addition, in the transnational co-production of *boro*'s aesthetic values and cultural meanings, this research considers the perspectives of those involved in the process of *boro*'s transformation and gathers experience and knowledge from the creators, the textile

owners, the exhibitors and the outsiders. By teasing out the evolution of *boro* from the cycle “folk craft – art – design – fashion”, I argue that *boro*, on a material level, used to be widely recognised and practised in Japan, not only in Aomori. Through the value creation process, the original “*boro*”, the lowercase term which indicates repaired patchwork itself, gradually turns into the upper case “Boro” which is determined by commerce and art markets in order to encompass new types of contemporary practices and aesthetic possibilities.

Drawing on Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory, this research uses the “Transient – Rubbish – Durable” structure to analyse the process of value creation associated with *boro* within different contexts. When *boro* was first brought to the attention of the antiques and fine art market, collectors and dealers assigned this “Rubbish” a new value as a symbol of Japanese repair culture created with human care and imbued with local histories, achieving the initial value transition of *boro* from a folk craft to highly appreciated work shown in fine art spaces and auction rooms around the world. After the monetary value of *boro* rose, it then moved to another value creation process, becoming a visual inspiration for “sustainable fashion” practised by fashion designers. This process is somewhat more complex than the previous one, as *boro* materials are divided into different groups according to age. Some designers and fashion labels create new *boro* within the category of luxury by claiming that recycling *boro* is a new way of practising sustainable fashion, and the more ancient the fabrics, the more authentic the values they carry. The fall and rise of *boro* is a response to social climate and a reaction against economic depression and the fast pace of fashion and the modern lifestyle. Thus I propose that shifts in our perceptions about things are not determined by the change in the objects, but are instead shaped by tides of change in the way that we interpret the phenomena.

When *boro* is discussed within the context of fashion, it is worth noting that the fashion system itself is based on a constantly shifting cycle of value. Michael Thompson points out the



biased assertion that “fashion, being seen as frivolous, ephemeral, transient, and irrational, is not a fit subject for scholarly attention where what is prized is the serious, the persistent, the durable, and the rational.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, inspired by a poem written and performed by Sabrina Mahfouz at the Craft of Use event in London in 2014, I felt the need to include a practice-led research of individual *boro* makers as a part of the refashioning process:

Blend more  
Spend less  
Master your stuff  
Feel the love  
Reframe  
Up your game  
Play  
Play your way to  
A new way of wearing  
A new way of living  
Possibilities.

Let’s touch what we have  
To turn reality into a place  
That faces fashions  
Differently, sustainably  
Emotionally, locally  
With wisdom  
With skills  
Not punctuated only by the sounds of tills  
But of memories and laughter  
Let’s try harder  
Faster  
But with a long time view<sup>4</sup>

This poem and the stories I collected from *boro* makers open up the idea of how an investigation about making could access *boro* culturally from personal, emotional and haptic

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Thompson. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p.54.

<sup>4</sup> Sabrina Mahfouz, *Craft of Use* [ <http://www.sabrinamahfouz.com/> ] performed at the Craft of Use event, London College of Fashion, 26 March 2014. Kate Fletcher and Katelyn Toth-Fejdel, (eds.) *Craft of Use Event, a publication of the Local Wisdom Project, Centre for Sustainable Fashion*, available at: [https://issuu.com/sustainablefashion/docs/craft\\_of\\_use\\_event](https://issuu.com/sustainablefashion/docs/craft_of_use_event)

perspectives. I argue that today's *boro* practice provides a channel that makes connections and blurs boundaries between everyday things and works of art. Louise Bourgeois wrote: "The decay of ruins is irresistible because it reveals the passage of time as irresistible."<sup>5</sup> *Boro* embraces the conceptual idea of destruction and rebirth with the passage of time. In a world that is falling apart, I finally propose that *boro* and other mending practices offer a way of communicating human warmth and finding both individuality and social belonging.

### **Evaluation of Methodology**

This research project developed into a cultural investigation exploring a still-evolving history within a transcultural context. Ethnography and autoethnography were both employed as key methods in this project to work with oral information and primary source material spread across different kinds of practice, with people working with *boro* from various perspectives. I consider each of my interviewees a centre of ideas supported by their own knowledge and network systems, like one root of a rhizome structure. They are independent and unique, but not isolated from each other. I use root/rhizome structure to describe people I met in the *boro* world because each of them can be a root and that root can have other roots growing out of it, forming a network. Any point of the roots can also be connected to each other, taking me to a rhizomatic story. It is a metaphor of Deleuze's thoughts about how ideas and movements linked together without a single centre. His work illuminates my thinking about flow, rhizome and becoming that all challenge a stabilised and hierarchical structure.

In Deleuze's definition of the fold, he conceptualised the word as a "comprised and convoluted state of the serial process of implication and explication".<sup>6</sup> As a researcher, I have

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<sup>5</sup> Louise Bourgeois, quoted by Germano Celant in *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works* (Milan: Skira, 2010), p.251.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene B. Young, Gary Genosko and Janell Watson. *The Deleuze and Guattari Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.60.

found myself half an insider and half an outsider in relation to the observation project, gradually being folded and creating new folds in the process of research. In the very early stages of this project, I positioned myself as a new *boro* enthusiast to search for the “common knowledge” that has been most frequently believed as fact in order to experience the story of *boro* as it has been conveyed to the general public. As I followed different paths to trace *boro*, I gradually identified the conflicts through the rhizomatic network of collectors, makers, dealers and curators. Eventually, in the later phases of my research, I could create my own “folds”, to build particular connections between different agencies and analyse the process as an observer.

Researching as an outsider, I am able to receive more direct reactions and feedback from my subjects. For example, I often had more opportunities for longer conversations with textile dealers in flea markets if they considered me a potential customer. Once they knew my research intentions, some dealers would refuse to talk with me, or prevented me from taking photographs of their textiles. When I was watching the exhibition of Jan Kath’s *boro* rug before the panel discussion took place, I could be a silent listener to hear more about people’s honest feelings about his work and also ask them questions. After my talk, however, most of the time I became the one being asked questions, as the audience now saw me as a *boro* insider.

But being an outsider may not help in conversations with certain groups, especially textiles collectors or people with expertise in *boro*, because most of my interviewees in galleries and museums expected to talk with a researcher who has prepared intellectually, otherwise they would feel it was unnecessary to share so much information. I visited some of my interviewees – for example, Philippe Boudin and Morita Tadashi – again about a year after our first interviews. In the case of Morita, our first meeting, in 2017, was mostly led by his wife to introduce me some pieces in his shop, as at that time my knowledge about *boro* was still very limited. But before our second interview I had done much more work and talked with

his clients and other collecting colleagues, and Morita was more willing to share his experience with me, as well as his books and personal photographic archive of Nukata's exhibition in 2000.

In addition to the interviews, informal conversations and connections also make me feel more immersed in this project as an insider. Some of my interviewees would update me about events or their new projects, and in some cases I would also try to make new connections between them. For example, after my field trip to Okuno Ryuichi's thatched cottage studio, I introduced his work to Amy Sylvester Katoh, the owner of the Blue and White shop in Tokyo. A month later, Okuno posted a photo of Katoh's visit to his studio and a message of thanks on his Instagram feed.<sup>7</sup> I also helped Amuse Museum to contact potential exhibitors in the UK and China. When the exhibition travelled to Beijing, I attended the conference and later gave a guide to the exhibition for fashion students at BIFT as part of their "Fashion and Ethnicity" workshop. Along with the experience I have discussed in relation to Lindsey Gradolph's work, as a researcher, except for gaining knowledge from people, I also try to promote new connections and co-produce knowledge with other participants. This approach can be applied to explore crafts that have not previously been treated in an academic way and have the potential to be developed into domains other than fine art and crafts.

I have discussed my concerns about the difficulties in this research in terms of the language barrier. For this specific project, which mostly focuses on the global revival of *boro*, translation was only needed in a few cases. But when I stayed in Japan and conducted scheduled interviews, I could feel from interviewees' answers that there might be still be many more fascinating stories about *boro* to be heard. Due to the limited time I could stay in Japan, I had to refuse some invitations that my interviewees suggested I might like to accompany them to. I believe that this would be a good future direction for the study of *boro* for researchers who are able to stay longer in Japan and who are native speakers of Japanese.

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<sup>7</sup> Photo from Instagram @oldindustrial, posted on January 26, 2019.

## Potential Directions in the Future

This research has shown that religious wear (*kesa*) is believed to play a strong role in *boro*, and that there are also different patchwork cultures related to spiritual beliefs such as Buddhism and Zen. Therefore, this study reveals the potential value of post-doctoral work on the relationship between spiritual beliefs and patchwork in East Asia.

While this PhD project has drawn to a close, *boro*'s travels are continuing. In 2020, the scheduled exhibition in New York Japan Society was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent exhibitions in Europe may also be affected. But I believe they will eventually return. In my interview with Kiyoshi Tatsumi, director of Tokyo's Amuse Museum, there is one story he told me that I have thought about over and over again. A few years after Amuse Museum opened, Mr Tatsumi put up a board in the front of the entrance, saying: "*boro* has been known around the world." At the time, Tatsumi said he felt so embarrassed about his ambitious optimism, and he was even a little ashamed of himself for writing this. But now it has come to pass. Amuse Museum is currently closed, and looking for a new location. It might be far away from Tokyo, but this does not worry Tatsumi, who is considering a new space for contemporary designers and *boro* makers to show their work: refashioned *boro*. Looking back on this project, "what is *boro* to you" is the question that I constantly asked people and myself. This question is not only about definitions, it is a reminder for us to reflect on the revitalised concept "*Boro*" beyond its original intention and function. When we consider *boro* a continual process of becoming, it is also an acknowledgement of a shared endeavour by all of its creators, wearers and curators. And as a researcher, I also feel I'm part of the *boro* world and a contributor in the knowledge co-creation process. I'm experiencing the ongoing *boro* history and recording its changing narratives today through making, showing and designing. The creativities, collaborations and passions of the designers and *boro* practitioners make this project a rewarding cultural journey across geographical, social and cultural spaces.

Finally, I hope this research will lead readers to reflect beyond *boro*: as Prown wrote, “material things are heir to all sorts of ills – they break, get dirty, smell, wear out; abstract ideas remain pristine, free from such worldly debilities”.<sup>8</sup> 2020 will be a special year in human history because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a recent article entitled “The End of the (Fashion) World as We Know It”, published on the *Business of Fashion* website, Tim Blanks calls on the fashion industry to reshape the value chain and asks us to rethink our own habits and relationship with “inexorable nature”.<sup>9</sup> This is the time for us to re-examine many life choices, and it is also a chance for other industries, not only fashion, to re-evaluate notions of value, scarcity and resources, and to deepen respect for nature and human labour, as this research has continually demonstrated.

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<sup>8</sup> Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method”, *Winterthur Portfolio* 17: 1 (1982), p.1-19.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Blanks, The End of the (Fashion) World as We Know It. *Business of Fashion*, 24 March, 2020, available at: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/tims-take/the-end-of-the-fashion-world-as-we-know-it>

## **Appendix**

### **APPENDIX I**

### **CONFIRMATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL**

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epigeum

# Certificate

Number: 1797120003

This is to certify that

Leren Li

Successfully completed the course

## Ethics 1: Good research practice

as part of the Epigeum Online Course System with a score of 90%.

Dated: 19 February 2018

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**APPENDIX II**  
**INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM SAMPLES**



### Project Information Sheet

Transcultural Patchwork: Japanese Patchwork and Mending Culture

For further information  
 Supervisor: Sarah Cheang  
 Email: sarah.cheang@rca.ac.uk

18/04/18

Dear Potential Participant,

I am Leren Li, a PhD student in the History of Design Department at the Royal College of Art. As part of my studies, I am conducting a research project entitled “Transcultural Patchwork: Rethinking Japanese Patchwork and Mending Culture”. You are invited to take part in this research project which explores the boro development in Japan.

If you consent to participate, this will involve:

- An interview with the researcher, and the approximate time of the interview is one to two hours.
- Have photos taken and be quoted directly in research papers and presentations by Leren Li

Participation is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time and there will be no disadvantage if you decide not to complete the survey. All information collected will be confidential. All information gathered from the survey will be stored.

If you have any concerns or would like to know the outcome of this project, please contact my supervisor (Sarah Cheang) at the below address.

Thank you for your interest,

Complaints Clause:

This project follows the guidelines laid out by the Royal College of Art Research Ethics Policy.

If you have any questions, please speak with the researcher. If you have any concerns or a complaint about the manner in which this research is conducted, please the address the RCA Research Ethics Committee by emailing [ethics@rca.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@rca.ac.uk) or by sending a letter addressed to:  
The Research Ethics Committee  
Royal College of Art  
Kensington Gore  
London  
SW7 2EU



Royal College of Art

**RESEARCH &  
INNOVATION**

### Consent Form

Transcultural Patchwork: Rethinking Japanese Patchwork and Mending Culture

For further information  
Supervisor: Sarah Cheang  
Email: sarah.cheang@rca.ac.uk

18/04/18

I (*please print*).....have read the information on the research project “Transcultural Patchwork: Japanese Patchwork and Mending Culture” which is to be conducted by Leren Li from the Royal College of Art, and all queries have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to voluntarily participate in this research and give my consent freely. I understand that the project will be conducted in accordance with the Information Sheet, a copy of which I have retained.

I understand that I can withdraw my participation from the project at any time, without penalty, and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

I consent to:

- Take the interview and share my knowledge and experience.
- Have photos taken and be quoted directly in research papers and presentations by Leren Li

I understand that all information gathered will be stored securely, and my opinions will be accurately represented. Any images in which I can be clearly identified will be used in the public domain only with my consent.

Print Name:.....

Signature.....

Date: .....

**Complaints Clause:**

This project follows the guidelines laid out by the Royal College of Art Research Ethics Policy.

If you have any questions, please speak with the researcher. If you have any concerns or a complaint about the manner in which this research is conducted, please the address the RCA Research Ethics Committee by emailing [ethics@rca.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@rca.ac.uk) or by sending a letter addressed to:  
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SW7 2EU

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(Note: all the Japanese language interviews were simultaneously translated to me. I took some notes during the interviews, but I wasn't able to transcribe everything in Japanese due to the communication difficulty.)