

Fiber Art

By Iseki Masaaki

The long tradition of creating practical items through weaving and dying—tapestries and carpets in the West versus kimono in Japan—is well known. In recent times this tradition has undergone a design and technique revolution in response to various art movements and activities in the fine arts field. As in painting and sculpture, separate identities have come to be sought for weaving and dying. It is said that the influence of the ceramic art world has been particularly strong in the case of weaving, deriving from the fact that ceramics, a practical industrial art, made an impression with its quick divergence from utilitarianism after World War II and the appearance of abstract *objets d'art*.

Weaving has steadily moved away from practicality in pursuit of strict works of beauty, on a level with fine art. This trend has steadily gained force since the Second World War. Under the name "fiber art" (or "fiber work") three-dimensional work similar to painting has been encouraged and a variety of material mixtures have come to be used. In addition to thread, all sorts of materials that until now would have been unthinkable in the case of tapestries or kimono, such as unspun fibers, string and rope, fabric, bark and wood chips, leather, and feathers, have been used. From the technical standpoint as well, knitting and basket-weaving techniques have been used in place of machine weaving and

many other methods, including tying, binding, or winding, have been employed, raising the craft to a level suited to the name "fiber art."

Japanese fiber art began to take shape from around the end of the 1960s. The long tradition related to kimono exists unchanged and whether for fabrics, dyes, or techniques a break from certain set standards has not been possible, nor an escape from utilitarianism, and as such, just as in the area of Japanese-style painting (*nihonga*) in Japan's modern arts, it has not been feasible to move in an avant-garde direction. In comparison, fiber art has been able to freely find its own path in response to international art trends. Moreover, it

might also be said that a lack of traditions related to tapestries also permitted Japanese fabric artists to quickly break away from utilitarian concerns and move in directions related to fine art.

There were many women among the first generation of artists who studied in America and Europe before returning to Japan in the late '60s. The birth of fiber art was accelerated by the influence of a new wave from foreign countries and the stimuli absorbed at the International Biennial at Lausanne. In 1971 the "New Textile Artists" exhibition, held at the National Museum of Modern Arts Kyoto, introduced diverse aspects of Japan's world of dyeing and weaving. At that time Takagi Toshiko, Horiuchi



Breathing-II, Sakuma Michiko, 1992, wool, raffia, flax, Art Box Yokohama



Image City (Imeeji Toshi), Nakamura Kimi, 1993, dyes, mesh, metal frame, Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art "1993 Fiber Art"

Noriko, Tokushige Emiko, and other members of the first generation of artists were not yet using the name fiber art, but the works exhibited there drew attention for their new and novel designs. This had a tremendous influence on young artists and six Japanese artists were subsequently selected for the 1973 Lausanne International Biennial. The three-dimensional works shown at that time made a strong impression in other countries.

Many fiber artists later began to

appear and by the 1980s, although there was a tendency toward stereotypical patterns as opposed to a pursuit of originality, similar to other areas of fine art, many routes were followed in a search for increased individuality and this continues today. Fiber art exhibits have now come to be held frequently and in many locations.

Broadly speaking, we might say that, if only due to the lack of a tradition related to tapestries, Japan was not afflicted by the 1980s-style phe-

nomenon to revert to the flat and concrete, but rather that outstanding artists who devote their energies to completely new areas of artistic expression with fibers have appeared. However, noting each artist's individuality and originality, there should be great expectations for future developments.

Iseki Masaaki, an art critic mainly in the field of history of Japanese and Western modern art, is a professor at Meisei University in Tokyo.