The art of giving

Though the custom is now much diminished, the bestowing of gifts in Japan has throughout many eras been associated with elaborate ceremony. Crucial to this has been the use of intricately designed cloths called *fukusa*. Roger Yorke unwraps the layers of symbolism and tells the story of these unique textiles

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1 *Fukusa* depicting the illusions of palaces in the bubbles of a clam's breath (detail), Japan, early 19th century. Plain satin silk face with fine and detailed gold-metallic couching (*koma-nui*) for the palace scene, and satin-stitch silk embroidery to create the frothing sea; orange silk crêpe (*chirimen*) lining dyed with safflower-petal (*beni*) dye; 0.66 x 0.84 m (2′ 2″ x 2′ 9″). All *fukusa* author's collection

2 Close-up detail of gold-metallic couching (*koma-nui*) in (1)

The Japanese custom of ritual gift-giving emerged many centuries ago as a means of strengthening social relationships to achieve mutual prosperity in an unpredictable agrarian society. *Fukusa* are one-of-a-kind Japanese art cloths created to cover a gift on a tray of wood or lacquer during certain traditional Japanese formal social rituals. .

The *fukusa* and accompanying gift possessed considerable emotional force during the formal gift-giving ritual, symbolising appreciation and the delivery of good wishes to the recipient. Moreover, the opulence of the embellishments, including the finest embroidery and the extensive use of gold-wrapped thread, signalled the giver's financial status. Most *fukusa* were created by professional *fukusa* masters and were costly on account of the sophisticated and laborious techniques involved.

The term *fukusa* also includes cloths used during the Japanese tea ceremony; however, this article is devoted to the more praiseworthy gift-covering variety that are technically referred to as *kake fukusa*. It is thought that the custom of covering gifts with *fukusa* originated in the 17th century; the earliest surviving examples were passed on to the Konbuin Temple in Nara in 1713.

Until about the late 18th century, the *fukusa* gift-covering custom was practised by only the upper-class *daimyo* (nobles) and samurai in the court-cities of Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto, where a complex ritual of gift-giving bolstered the traditional social status. But by the early 19th century, the Japanese merchant class had gained increased wealth and embraced some of the lifestyles of the lords and samurai. With the arrival of the Meiji period and the abolishment of the feudal system in 1868, the disappearance of samurai and *daimyo* left the *fukusa* rituals solely in the hands of the merchants and other wealthier members of Japanese society. The *fukusa* tradition weakened considerably at about the time of the Pacific War, and nowadays it is mainly restricted to weddings, corporate award ceremonies and cultural events.

The traditional gift-giving ceremony is a formal proceeding with an etiquette. The gift giver would either travel to the recipient's home, or arrangement would be made for both to meet at a neutral location. The *fukusa*-covered gift, mounted on a tray (3), is presented to the recipient following an oblique explanation by the gift-giver of the reason for the visit and gift. When the gift-giver leaves, the recipient examines the artwork symbology on the *fukusa* and the gift itself, at which time the sentiment and meaning of the offerings are wholly realised. Some days later, the *fukusa* and the gift-tray are traditionally returned to the giver.

The Japanese had various gift-giving occasions, so the artwork on a *fukusa* was created to be appropriate and meaningful. The two most popular *fukusa*-giving occasions were marriage and New Year; others involved birth, condolences on a death, attainment of manhood and other family events, as well as various festivals. In the case of both marriages and the attainment of manhood, the *fukusa* was the entire gift.

The motifs painted or embroidered on a *fukusa* are sourced from a deep inventory of traditional Japanese auspicious entities. Some of the most popular motifs include pine,

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3 *Fukusa* depicting bundles of dried abalone (*tabane noshi*) and treasure ball (*houju*) motifs covering a gift-tray, Japan, first half 19th century

4 *Fukusa* depicting a lone crane flying over a rugged seashore, Japan, late Meiji period (1868–1912). 0.66 x 0.79 m (2′ 2″ x 2′ 7″)

bamboo, red-crested crane, tortoise, carp, fans, cherry and plum blossoms, *kai awase* shell-matching game, and the Tale of Takasago (involving the renowned marriage of Jo and Uba). For the giver, the *fukusa* symbolic artwork demonstrated his scholarship and aesthetic sensibility.

In Akihiko Takemura's 1991 book *Fukusa* (p.237) we read: 'A parody, a latent meaning, an expression using homophones or the enumeration of the motifs during the gift ceremony were enjoyed as a pleasant game. On the other hand, patterning was created that was suitable to differentiate man from woman, the working classes and people of various ages, as well as patterns appropriate for celebration, mourning, the seasons, and the courteous occasions in one's life. The designs in the patterning with many connotations and subjects relate to waka poems, myths or legends, stories, various precepts of life, Chinese poems, Gagaku court music, No plays, Kyogen, Kabuki, festival events or the genre of everyday life'.

Created by specialised masters, *fukusa* are typically almost square in shape. They vary in size between 20 and 112 cm on a side, averaging about 64 cm per side. The typically silk 'face' is most often backed by a red or orange silk lining, with a tassel on each corner to enable one to pick up the *fukusa* without touching the fabric. The face-fabric motifs were created utilising a variety of techniques: weft brocade (*nishiki*), numerous types of embroidery (*shishu*), paste-resist hand-painting (*yuzen*), laborious slit-tapestry (*tsuzure-ori*), or rarely, patchwork appliqué or cut velvet. Of these *fukusa* techniques, embroidery and *yuzen*-painting were favoured, and were applied on a base fabric tightly stretched on a frame.

Of the over-forty embroidery techniques available to 'paint' a *fukusa*, the most common one involved *koma-nui* (couched) gold and silver-wrapped threads that were laid in position on the surface of a shiny blue or other colour satin silk fabric and then permanently held down by very fine holding stitches. In contrast, the *yuzen* resist-dye technique usually involved painting on a dull *chirimen* (crêpe) silk fabric that was often of an off-white hue, or alternatively, on a *shioze*. The sophistication and artistic nature of the painting on such *fukusa* rivalled that of other mediums such as canvas or scrolls, but was inherently more labour intensive and accomplished, because of the many challenging stages involved in the *yuzen* process.

Fukusa were made usually from silk, but in rare cases wool or velvet. The four most common silk fabric types were *shusu* (plain satin), *shioze* (weft-ribbed plain-weave silk), *chirimen* (crêpe), and *tsuzure-ori* (slit-tapestry); and rarely *donsu* (polychrome figured satin), patterned twill, *kinran* (gold-thread brocade), *nishito* (weft-faced brocade) and *ro* ('open-eye' gauze).

There are several obstacles to studying *fukusa* age. One is that artists and workshops did not sign or date their creations. In addition, there were no 18th- and 19th-century *hinagata-bon* textile pattern books for *fukusa* as there were for kimono, nor during that time were there woodblock prints or paintings that depicted *fukusa* detail. Nomura Shojiro (1879–1943) was an important early 20th-century collector and researcher of kimono and *fukusa*; however, when his collection was eventually donated to the Mills College Museum by his son in 1953, the date attributions Nomura provided for each *fukusa* were arguably too exact (averaging about twelve-year time periods) to be wholly believed.

Akihiko Takemura includes not only Nomura/Mills College examples in his book, but those from the V&A and other institutions and private collections, including many fabulous examples from the Miyai Company Collection. He takes a more cautious approach, designating *fukusa* as dating to mid-Edo (18th century), late Edo (1800–68), early Meiji (1868–80), mid-Meiji (1880–1900), late Meiji (1900–12).

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5 *Fukusa* depicting Jimmu Tenno, the first Japanese emperor, Japan, mid-19th century. *Shioze* silk face with *yuzen*-painting and silk embroidery, red silk crêpe lining; 0.66 x 0.74 m (2′ 2″ x 2′ 5″)

There are some useful methods to assist in dating a *fukusa*. The fabrics utilised for most 18th-century examples were *chirimen*, *donsu* or *shusu*. *Shusu* was the favoured fabric for early to mid-19th-century (late Edo) *fukusa*, with rare examples of *shioze*, *chirimen*, *velvet*, *donsu* and *gauze*. During the early to mid-Meiji period, both *shusu* and *shioze* were equally popular, with *chirimen* somewhat less so. By the Taisho period, the most popular fabric was *shioze*, with a lesser amount of machine-assisted brocade.

Although it is generally accepted that earlier *fukusa* sported just tufts of unspun thread at their corners, and over time such corner embellishments developed into full-blown complex tassels, there are problems with placing too much dating relevance to the type of tassel or the lack of them. Firstly, we do not know when the tassel custom began so we cannot be certain that all *fukusa*, especially 18th- and early 19th-century ones, ever had tassels attached. Granted, tassels detach from the main cloth quite easily, as there are only a few threads securing them, so it is likely that most *fukusa* now devoid of tassels once had them. A sizeable number of *fukusa* exhibit tassels that appear to be of more recent vintage than the main cloth. It is plausible that, as *fukusa* were family heirlooms, missing tassels would sometimes be replaced by a more modern set.

The late Edo period saw rare examples of *fukusa* sporting a *mon* (family crest) on the lining. However, by the mid-Meiji, having a large *mon* on the reverse side—either centred or on the lower left or right—became more popular. This *mon* popularity increased over the next fifty years, so a sizeable proportion of late Meiji, Taisho and early Showa *fukusa* incorporate a *mon* on the lining. Placing the *mon* as a standalone motif on the centre of the actual face of the *fukusa* occurred in some Edo *fukusa* and Meiji examples, with the practice increasing during the 20th century.

Types of *fukusa* patterning techniques and their execution were more popular in some periods than others. Most 18th-century *fukusa* were patterned exclusively with extremely fine silk or metallic embroidery, with a minority of surviving examples exhibiting a combination of embroidery and *yuzen*-painting. During the subsequent late Edo period, embroidery, especially on plain satin, continued to dominate. Slit-tapestry came a distant second, with *shioze* or *chirimen* in some examples.

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The popularity of embroidered plain satin continued during the early Meiji period, with *yuzen*-painted *chirimen* also favoured. The mid-Meiji period saw a diminishment of the popularity of embroidered satin, with embroidered and *yuzen*-painted *shioze* becoming the most popular. Early 20th-century *fukusa* continued to be embellished with *yuzen*-painting and embroidery, but gradually the less labour-intensive machine-assisted brocades became more prevalent. In general, such popular techniques as embroidery, slit tapestry and *yuzen* painting were finer and more complex on earlier mid- and late Edo *fukusa* than on Meiji and 20th-century examples.

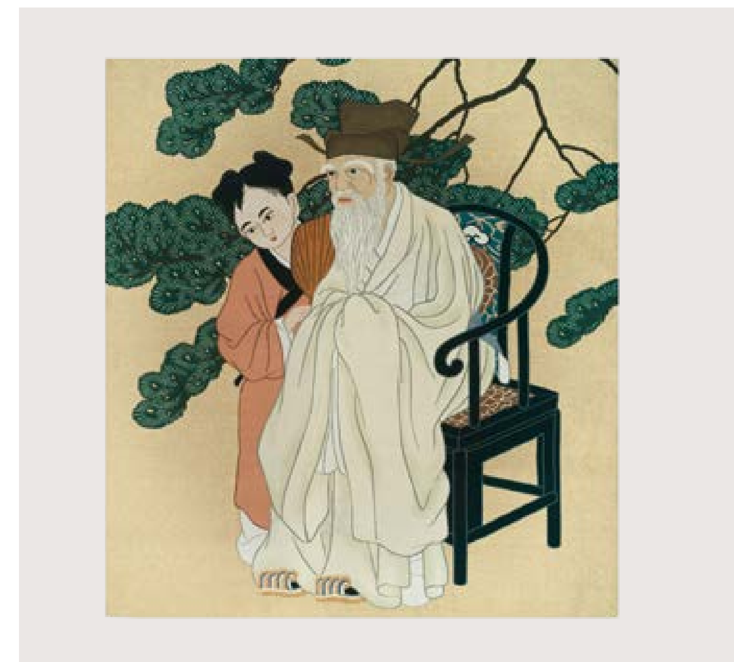
Slit-tapestry weave, referred to in China as *kesi* or *ko'ssu*, and in Japan as *tsuzure-ori*, was a painstaking and revered technique that involved artisans utilising different shuttles for each colour, passing back and forth only when a certain colour was required. This process results in tiny slits between the different colours. Although most slit-tapestry *fukusa* were made during the late Edo period, one example, depicting an old sage and assistant (7), was probably created during the Taisho period (1912–26). This later example exhibits a charming folkloric artistry.

The art on 18th-century *fukusa* generally had a somewhat stiff, charming folk-art quality, with motifs often spread out evenly, leaving large expanses of empty background space. Themes at that time mostly related to nature and man-made auspicious objects, with rare instances of Chinese legends involving humans. The late Edo period saw a flowering of many art themes, with the most popular ones relating to Chinese and Japanese legends; Heian court life; *mon*; and Japanese theatre. These themes continued into the Meiji, Taisho and early Showa periods, with the most realistic *fukusa* artwork being created during the Meiji and Taisho periods.

One *fukusa* depicts a supernatural phenomenon the Japanese call *shinkiro*, an illusion of palaces in the bubbles of a clam's breath (1). *Shinkiro* sometimes materialise before sailors on a calm sea, far off over the horizon. These mirages are thought to be breathed out from the ocean's depths by mythical giant clams. Legend insists that these mirages are not illusionary at all, but a vision of the palace of Ryujin, the dragon king who lives on the bottom of the sea. In Buddhist teaching, we may dream or even live in palaces or other great places, but all these material things are impermanent and illusory. The idea that perceiving impermanence is the key to happiness is not something that can be understood by intellect alone. Buddhism teaches that when it is perceived that the causes of hate and greed are illusions, hate and greed—and the misery they cause—disappear. I have not seen this *shinkiro* imagery in any other Japanese textiles in museum or private hands. There exists in the British Museum, however, an ivory *netsuke* created by the Japanese artist Kagetoshi with the same theme.

The crane is a popular auspicious motif in traditional Japanese art. Created for a marriage gift-giving event, one old *fukusa* depicts two cranes in flight. Cranes were thought to live not just decades but thousands of years, becoming virtually synonymous with immortality. In the context of a traditional Japanese wedding, two cranes represent eternal loyalty for the bride and groom, and a lasting soaring spirit, health and happiness. Another *fukusa* with a crane motif (4) has a different connotation. This crane flying alone over a rocky shore and raging sea possibly represents the cranes' legendary duty to be intermediaries between heaven and earth, a messenger of the gods to humans, thus symbolising the spiritual ability to enter a higher state of consciousness.

In Japan, fan imagery was practised both by important artists and by many laymen and men of letters. Fan motifs were created by artists both reflecting the upward curving semi-circle, or alternatively, such as in the *fukusa* featured here (6), the same shape curving downwards. Fans offered 'a glimpse into the everyday', as one Japanese proverb puts it. The action of opening a fan is an auspicious omen for the 'unfolding' of the future. Fans and fan imagery are often given as gifts to honour births or birthdays, and typically contain some floral designs. In Japanese imagery, flowers are symbolic of life—chrysanthemums especially, because their many petals stand for many long years. The tortoise and crane images on this *fukusa* symbolise the wish for a long life, a popular depiction on birthday *fukusa*. The pair of small fully-embroidered sparrows symbolise a loving couple.



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6 *Fukusa* depicting fan motifs, Japan, mid- to late Meiji period (1868–1912). 0.66 x 0.81 m (2′ 2″ x 2′ 8″)

7 *Fukusa* depicting an old sage and his assistant, Japan, Taisho period (1912–26). 0.69 x 0.74 m (2′ 3″ x 2′ 5″)

8 *Fukusa* depicting legendary turtles ascending to the sky, Japan, mid 19th century. 0.63 x 0.71 m (2′ 1″ x 2′ 4″)

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Legends were a popular theme on *fukusa*. The rare subject of one *fukusa* (5) is Jimmu Tenno, the mythical first Japanese emperor, upon whose bow, history relates, a hawk alighted one day, to denote victory and conquest. Another popular *fukusa* motif was that of dried abalone. The example in (3) has a main theme of dried abalone (*tabane noshi*), with three treasure balls (*houju*). Abalone was often used as a ritual offering to the gods at New Year. 'Noshi' sounds like the Japanese word for 'expand' or 'progress', and is thus an auspicious symbol of the continuation of the family line.

A *fukusa* motif almost as favoured as the ubiquitous crane was that of the *minogame*. This depicts a Japanese mythological animal—with a life span of 10,000 years—symbolising longevity and good luck. The name *minogame* translates as 'raincoat turtle', referring to the growth of vegetation or seaweed which gradually covered its back as it grew older, making it look as if it was wearing a peasant's straw raincoat (*mino*). The Japanese believe that the *minogame* is ever listening and thus enlightened by Buddha's teachings. When attaining the age of 1,000 years, the *minogame* is thought to be capable of speaking in human languages. The *fukusa* featured here depicts a scene of *minogame* and their young, some ascending skyward (8). Although *minogame* are popular subjects in Japanese iconography, the imagery on this *fukusa* is both unique (they are shown ascending skywards) and superlative in terms of concept and execution.