

WASHI - History and Features

Washi is the Japanese word for the traditional papers made from the long inner fibers of three plants, *wa* meaning Japanese and *shi* meaning paper. As Japan rushes with the rest of the world into the 21st Century, and more modern technologies take over, machines produce similar-looking papers which have qualities very different from authentic washi. As of the fall of 2008, there remained fewer than 350 families still engaged in the production of paper by hand.

HISTORY

Though paper was originally made in China in the first century, the art was brought to Japan in 610 AD by Buddhist monks who produced it for writing sutras.

By the year 800, Japan's skill in papermaking was unrivalled, and from these ancient beginnings have come papers unbelievable in their range of color, texture and design.

It was not until the 13th century that knowledge of papermaking reached Europe - 600 years after the Japanese had begun to produce it.

By the late 1800's, there were in Japan more than 100,000 families making paper by hand. Then with the introduction from Europe of mechanized papermaking technology and as things "Western" became sought after including curtains (not shoji) and French printmaking papers (not kozo), production declined until by 1983 only 479 papermaking families were left. Today the few remaining families struggle to compete in the world market with handmade papers from India, Thailand and Nepal, where a lower cost of living makes it possible to produce papers more cheaply.

FEATURES OF WASHI

Warmth: Literally warmer to the touch than Western papers made of wood pulp, washi feels soft and creates a feeling of warmth in the viewer. Its tactile qualities make it wonderful for invitations and books.

Body: Since the fibers are left long and pounded and stretched rather than chopped, washi has a deceptive strength. Pure-fibred washi can even be sewn and was used for armor and kimono-lining in earlier times.

Strength: The length of the fibers and the nature of the raw materials ensure that washi is highly workable when wet. Thus it is excellent for papier maché, and etching in which the paper must be soaked. These long fibers produce a luxurious deckle edge, the rough edge which marks a handmade paper.

Flexibility: Since the fibers position themselves at random, there is no real grain to washi. This gives the paper a resistance to creasing, wrinkling and tearing - and means it can be used more like cloth, for covering books, or boxes etc.

Lightness: Washi weighs much less than other papers of equal thickness. As a paper for books, it can create texts of apparent weightlessness.

Low acidity: Traditionally-made Japanese papers are truly acid-free if they are unbleached and unsized. Examples of printed papers exist in perfect condition in Japan from 1000 years ago. Today, papers from the village of Kurotani are among the finest archival papers.

Decoration: For centuries, colorful designs applied by woodblock or hand-cut stencils have created vividly characteristic papers, for decorative use. Recently, silkscreened chiyogami (small repeated-patterned paper) is available in an unbelievable range and widely used by craftspeople. Although made by machine, the quality available is about 70% kozo and comes in hundreds of patterns.