

Dear All,

In October 2016 I visited the Kansai region of Japan for three weeks to learn more about traditional and contemporary methods of making and using Japanese paper, known as 'Washi'. I was interested in the ways in which the techniques of Japanese paper making differed from Western methods, the differences in fibre, sheet formation and preparation of the vat and the varying decorative finishes that are very distinct from those I have come across in my practice to date. In 2013 I had met a Japanese paper artist in London at an international paper conference and was shown a brief demonstration and some finished products. Since then I had been intrigued and eager to learn more, and thanks to the generosity of the Stationers Foundation, as a recipient of the Francis Matthew Scholarship I was able to pursue this wish.

In the first couple of days of my visit I took a guided tour around the city of Kyoto with Mr Toshi San who showed me the key shops in which I could buy a range of papers and finished paper goods. The papers were primarily Washi made from the fibres Kozo, Gampi or Matsumoto and came in a variety of colours and intricate finishes. My favourite was the fine lace detail that I understand comes from a water stencil technique. I also saw many beautiful printed Judai papers, similar to the patterns used for Kimono fabric printing. I visited the Kyoto Washi club where I had a go at making my own sheets of decorative Washi using coloured dyes. The paper was dried on a metal hot plate similar to a flat radiator and it gave me the idea to try out a similar method back in the UK. I was able to buy some supplies for use at home and as keepsake inspiration!



I then travelled to the nearby town of Nara for the afternoon to visit Christine Flint Sato a British artist who has been living in Japan for many years. She works only in ink and paper and has a vast knowledge of the relationship between the two including having written a very interesting book I was able to purchase. She showed me a gallery of some of her work and we talked about the production of ink sticks using oil and soot in traditional factories close to her home. I learnt about the different tints of colour that ink can take on depending on the length of burning time. We also talked about the importance of paper reacting with the natural inks, allowing for it to spread and absorb or resist and provide more solid structure to the ink depending on the desired effect. She also explained the method of stamping a small red artist mark on the corner of paper and suggested I could start doing this at home to identify the papers I make. We met twice more during the trip for a workshop teaching me how to use ink and brush for decorative effect on paper a method known as Sumi-e (also Japanese painting and calligraphy).

I visited many beautiful temples during my stay where Washi paper was used as lining for the sliding screens dividing rooms or on the back of sliding doors. The papers were sometimes flecked with gold and almost always painted using Japanese Sumi ink usually in minimal cloud patterns with occasional serene landscape scenes such as trees, flowers or birds. I was surprised how robust the fragile and ancient papers seemed to be, even in rooms with a lot of natural light the papers were in excellent quality and condition, testament to the strength of the Kozo fibre and skill of the traditional paper makers.



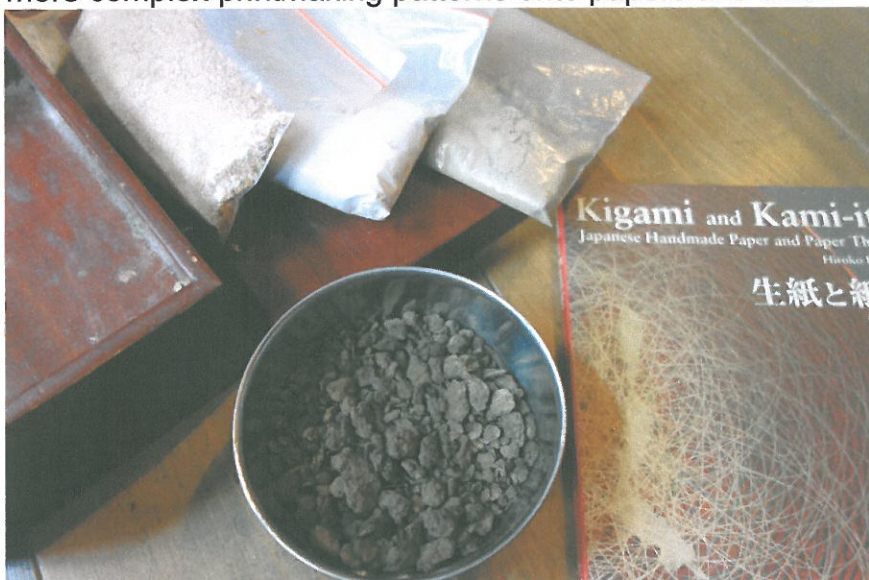
I was fortunate to go for a weekend to the Seto Art Islands, Naoshima and Teshima for the Setouchi Triennial exhibition, where many artists were working in traditional as well as contemporary art and crafts. I found that Japan valued its craft traditions very highly and some contemporary international artists were employing these historic techniques to create interesting and innovative art installations. Washi paper wasn't always used but other crafts such as tatami (straw) weaving, pottery and woodblock print were often a part of these works. Unfortunately visitors were not allowed to take photos inside the installations and exhibitions, however some photos from outside were possible!



Across my trip there were many beautiful stationary shops selling cards, envelopes, writing papers and I found that every cafe, museum or shop would take care to utilise high quality paper goods such as small bags, receipt envelopes, gift wrapping and so on. The culture in general valued fine attention to detail resulting in great, exquisite intricacy for even simple exchanges such as buying a gift whereby the item would be wrapped, tied and packaged in several ways, accompanied by a shop card, then put in a bag and the receipt in an envelope with another small calling card. Stationary was very much alive and a respected, integral part of daily life!



A short distance from Kyoto is a small traditional village called Miyama-Cho, famous for its thatched sloping roofs. The village also houses a small museum dedicated to Indigo dying, which is used in both cloth and paper decoration. Known as 'shibori' the indigo dying method goes back centuries and is particular to this region of Japan. In the museum I saw examples of decorated papers and dyed Kimonos among other things. I learnt that the patterns were made by using a variety of folding, wrapping and scrunching methods to block out the surface in some areas and expose it in others. It was also possible to use wax or rice paste relief stencils for more intricate designs. The indigo itself is grown regionally and once dried mixed with lye, saké and wheat husk and left to ferment. I saw how a similar approach is used for other traditional dye materials such as madder (for red) and marigold (for yellow). I also saw how a similar relief and stencil technique is used for more complex printmaking patterns onto papers and cloth.



I spent several days in the Echizen Paper Village where I saw first hand the daily lives of Japanese paper makers. Echizen is a very small village and yet it is home to many different paper making studios, each run by a family business comprising of the master paper maker who is in almost all cases aged between 70 and 80 years old and the 'apprentice' who is the son or daughter of the family. Japanese paper making, like Western methods, is hard physical work and involves a lot of repetitive actions. I saw the fibres being cleaned and processed and two huge buckets of natural 'neri' made from hibiscus root which helps the fibres to suspend in the water for more even dispersion. The Japanese mould is different to the style I am familiar with and during the workshops I found it difficult at first to maintain even coverage of the fibres and achieve a thin sheet as is desired for 'Washi'. Rather than formed in one single dip in the vat the Japanese method required several thin layers to be built up on the mould which is made from a large woven bamboo mat held between a wooden frame. The mould is suspended using rope from a bamboo cane hanging from the ceiling which gives it a spring and makes it easier to manoeuvre as it holds a proportion of the weight. With much practice I found it easier and I saw ways that I might be able to incorporate this technique into my work at home.



The local shrine in Echizen is a beautiful wooden temple building dedicated to the goddess of paper. According to legend the goddess lives in the mountains behind the shrine but can be encouraged down to the village for celebration and festival events.

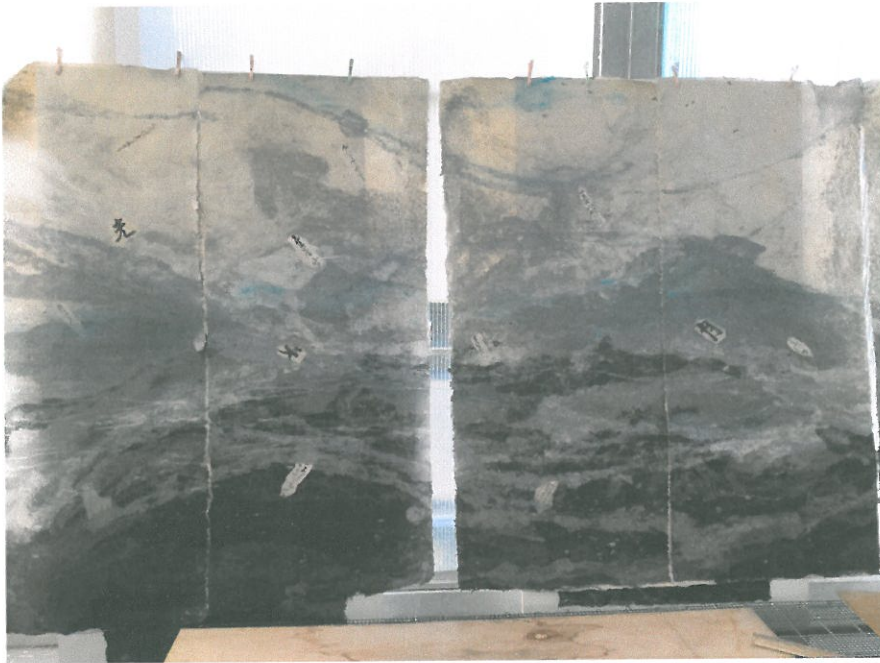


I also took a class in Japanese decorative paper marbling known as 'suminagashi' which uses a method of floating inks on water and using tiny amounts of pine oil to repel the ink in order to create patterns. The traditional pattern is a series of many concentric circles which is usually fanned out to create a more spiky look. I had practiced this technique once before but seeing it done by a master craftsman who was 90 years old felt like a true honour! I bought some other decorative papers to bring home for inspiration and as a keepsake.



Finally, back in Kyoto I visited the studio of internationally respected paper artist Kyoko Ibe who uses a unique technique to create large scale sheets of paper by pouring pulp on a mould rather than dipping it into the water. She works exclusively with Gampi fibre and

was keen to share with me the benefits of the fibre, including unconventional absorption rates which allow her to colour her pulp with natural pigments including semi precious stones such as Lapis Lazuli and Mica. She told me that she bought discounted excess stock of Gampi sheets from a paper making business that was closing down over 50 years ago, the sheets were previously made to be sold as covers for special edition books and important documents. She is still using that same stock to this day, re-pulping it in a beating machine imported from New Zealand, and says she has plenty enough left still! It was a really interesting and enjoyable experience to see a different side to Japanese paper culture through the eyes of a visual artist.



I left Japan feeling very excited by all these interesting experiences and new connections and inspired by the techniques and methods I had seen. I would like to express my gratitude to all at the Stationers Foundation and the Francis Matthew Scholarship Fund for enabling me to take such a special and rewarding trip.



Kind wishes,
Sarah Kelly x.