

Kumihimo: A Study in Japanese Braiding

Sine ni Dheaghaidh

History:

The Japanese concept of combining function and beauty becomes obvious when you consider the Art of Kumihimo. These beautiful braids were used to lace the many small plates of Samurai armor, to attach swords to their sashes and even to wrap the handles of their swords. Braids were also used in temples, shrines and tombs as edging for Buddhist flags and as attachments and ties for scrolls. In late period we see braiding used to tie the obi to prevent slippage.

The earliest evidence of braiding in Japan was in the Jomon period (400 BCE-300 CE). The word Jomon means “rope pattern” and describes the pottery dating to that era. The cords, made from plant fiber, were rolled or pressed into the wet clay to leave decorative impressions. In later periods, pottery figures and paintings showed men and women dressed in clothing adorned with braided cords used as belts, ties and hair adornments. Actual fragments of braids have been found as early as the Nara period (645 CE-784 CE). The Heian period (784 CE-1184 CE) saw the emergence of two types of braids. The Karakumi, a wide flat braid made from plied silk and edged with diamonds and decorated with birds and flowers, was worn by the Emperor and high ranking officials. The other braids, found hidden inside statues in temples, were round braids. The Saidai-ji, a 56 bobbin braid, is an example of these early braids.



A reproduction of the Saidai-ji, a 56 bobbin, 14th century braid, from Rodrick Owen; *Braids*

In the Kamakura (1185-1333) and the Muromachi (1333-1575), Japan experienced a long period of unrest and many wars. The demand for armor was great which meant the demand for braiding was also great. The braids for lacing armor were usually made of one color, while the braids for wrapping and attaching swords were patterned. The Kikko design, a hexagonal pattern representing the shell of a tortoise, was favored because it symbolized a long life. The Monoyama period (1575-1614) was peaceful, decreasing the need for armor and lacing. More aesthetic uses were found for braids, as in the tea ceremony, in temples and shrines and clothing.

Much of the information on how to make braids and the equipment used was kept secret by the family businesses and it is only in recent times have schools been opened in Japan and other parts of the world to teach this beautiful and useful Art.

Japanese Braiding Terms:

dai - a stand
fukuro - small bag
gumi - to plait or braid (same as kumi)
himo – string, cord, braid
kagami - mirror, the top of a maru dai
kumi - to plait or braid (same as gumi)
kumihimo - plaited or braided cord
kumikata - braiding method
maru – round
marudai – round stand
tama – weighted wooden spools or bobbing

Equipment and Materials:

Traditionally, kumihimo is made on a round-topped loom using bobbins, a silk warp counterweighted by a bag with lead weights calculated on the total weight of the bobbins.

My marudai is made from two wooden plaques and a dowel from AC Moore. My bobbins (tama) are made from wooden spools with round lead fishing weights inside and wooden disks glued over each end. My counterweight bag is made of cloth, with a draw string, a fishing swivel and more lead weights. It was built by my friend Halfdane of Hawkwood.

My braiding materials are cotton embroidery floss, perle cotton and cotton crochet thread. I have not used any Japanese silk because of the cost.

Bibliography

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