

Kiranada Sterling Benjamin

Roketsu Zome - The Art of Contemplation and Wax Resist

by Tunizia Abdur-Raheem

Kiranada Sterling Benjamin is an American artist who has mastered an historically Japanese art form, *roketsu zome* (wax resist dyeing) or *rozome* (wax dyeing).

Straddling two worlds, Kiranada (her name means 'she who radiates moonlight' in Sanskrit) has studied in the European style, studying art in the United States. She received a Bachelor's degree in art education from Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Ten years later, she studied fiber arts and achieved a Masters degree from Arizona State University. At the insistence of her family, who saw early on that she had a talent for teaching, she also has a teaching degree.

Kiranada has become quite an expert on *rozome*, authoring a book on the subject, "The World of Rozome: Wax Resist Textiles of Japan." Her exhibition in Indonesia, "Transcendence: Japanese Batik in Bali," featured her as an artist representative of Japanese batik. She describes, in her own words, a little of the history of the art:

"Rozome came from the Asian continent, as ro-kechi, with Chinese immigrants in the 8th Century and is one of the three ancient resist processes found among the 180,000 stored textiles in the Shoso-in Repository, Nara, Japan. Wax-resist textiles went out of favor during the following centuries and did not reappear until the 16th Century when Indian wax-printed fabrics arrived in Edo. The history jumps again to the past century when Japanese artists, visiting the Paris Exposition of 1900, found beautiful examples of Indonesian batik and came back to Japan inspired to try this process in their own style. The doors of the Repository, sealed for 1200 years were open to artists and researchers and a resurgence of wax-resist textiles as fine art, styled on screen and scroll painting, flourished. Now rozome is the choice of a group of artists who have carried it to extraordinary levels of sophistication using simple wax-resist and shaded dyeing techniques, producing 'kimono as canvas' as well as full size standing screens for their work. These are the artists with whom I studied from 1981 - 2000 and interviewed for my book."

Q. How did you discover silk painting? Where did you first find the art form?

I have been working on silk, I guess, for 35, almost 40 years and only heard of it being called "silk painting," perhaps in the past 15 years. So I have a long history of working on silk before I would call it silk painting. I think it was a wonderful kimono that I saw in a slide presentation at Arizona State University in the late 1970s. It was a most beautiful red kimono on silk and I fell in love. After finishing my Masters degree, I wanted to look into work that was that beautiful. I believe it was a shibori kimono, but I can't be sure.

Q. How did you end up staying in Japan for 18 years?

One of my students asked me what I would do if I had a million dollars. I said I would go around the world and I would start with Japan, studying crafts. In nine months, I was there with my daughter. I thought I would only stay there for a year, and then continue around the world. I ended up there two and a half years, left and returned, staying for another 16 years.

Q. You have children. So your children were raised in Japan?



Ignorance Into Wisdom

Yes. I have a son and a daughter. But it was my daughter who was with me most of the time in Japan.

Q. It seems like you traveled a lot.

I think at a young age I knew I was not going to stay on Hollingsworth Street forever. They gave me a tricycle when I was three and I started off down the street. And Mom decided at that point she wasn't going to call me back. She was going to let this one go! (laughs) "I'm full of stories!"

My mother had three daughters. I'm the one that got away. I'm the one that traveled the world for all the rest.

Q. Did you find there to be a difference between the approach to art in Japan and the U.S.? What did you find to be the key differences in the approach to art between U.S. and Japan? Or any other places that you lived?

Primarily, my training and background was both in art school in the United States as well as – mostly – in Japan. Most definitely, it's very different. I often mention that the United States is the land of the weekend workshop and Japan is the land of the 10-year study.

We go there (to Japan) and we need to stay a long time because there's a lot to learn – both artistically and culturally – and life based. There's a tremendous difference. There's a real focus on aesthetics and training, learning skills and how to do it beautifully there. I actually worked at a university in Japan and connected myself to a kimono company. My teacher, Yusuke Tange, was willing to take me on as a student soon after I arrived in Japan in 1981. He's still a very close friend 30 years later.

Q. He made kimono?

He was part of a fourth generation company that sold kimono. He was the first person who designed and produced his own work and started his own company but then connected with his parent company.

Q. You learned from him. Did you ever design kimono for this company?

Definitely. Inside of the first six months, I was doing kimono. When I got to Japan, I thought I was going to be studying *shibori* and *katazome* – paste resist. I had no idea that Japan had a tradition of wax resist. It was at this company that I saw this wax resist and it blew me away. It was so dynamic – the tremendously beautiful shading between deep color and pale tonalities. The skills that the artists carried in being able to do these processes – on kimono as well as on standing screens and obi as soon as I stepped into that workshop, into that studio, I knew that this was not going to be one year but that this was going to be a number of years of study.

Q. Did you speak Japanese before you went?

I had studied before I went. But it's a very difficult language. I still study. The nice thing – and that's what Tange-san said to me too – the thing about artists is our hearts are connected. And much of understanding art is seeing, watching. That was the tremendous difference between the United States and Japan. There you are in the studio and you observe. The teacher is not lecturing with you taking notes. You watch. I went into that studio with great big open eyes. I was to study with him twice a week. Sometimes



Pure Realms

he might be too busy to help me. I couldn't interfere with production. But I told him that I would be very happy for whatever he could help me with.

There were some days he was too busy. And I would just sit next to one of the workers and watch them painting dye on cloth which expressed it all. Then six hours later he would come to me and say "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting all this time." And I told him that I had learned so much just sitting and watching with my notebook sketching. It's a wonderful way of learning. Very different than in the West.

You take it in through the pores. And that's why they say it's the land of the 10 years study. You live the life. You learn how to be quiet and to watch and pick up what you will. Especially if you don't completely understand what's being said. You can't use your language. You have to use another ability. That ability to look and observe and take it in.

I love my teacher. In Japan, you don't come from a school, you come from a teacher. And if he or she takes you on, they take you on for life.

Q. Speaking of Yoshiko Wada, at our last conference she did seem to indicate that the Japanese artist studies for a long time before they consider themselves masterful.

Or, before they would ever consider exhibiting any of their work, they apprentice themselves to a studio and they stay there for more than 10 years before they then plan to start showing on their own. The worker would begin with one small part of the production of a kimono or something. And they would become skillful at that. But to do the entire process from start to finish, only the teacher would have the experience to do that.

The nice thing for me was that I went there in my mid-30s. I had already been teaching in the United States. I already had a Masters degree. I already had a number of exhibitions under my belt. So I went there with some confidence and with great humility and I did have an exhibition there within two years.

Q. That may give many silk painters heart. In silk painting there's so much to learn and so many techniques and so few avenues to learn that many silk painters end up teaching themselves. It's mostly a long study.

I do tell my students that I, myself, went to art school and have both undergraduate and graduate degrees in art. But now more and more people that I run into are gathering their education from taking workshops. There are many people that are very accomplished who offer workshops and people can dip into those things and then practice them on their own.

There's not a simple way. The true way of accomplishing it is to put in the hours and to do multiple, multiple pieces. And with each one you learn from the last piece. After so many years, I gained the confidence. I know what to expect if I put this dye on top of that dye or if I make that kind of a stroke. It's a lot of hours. But it's a total delight. I mean, what else would you rather be doing?

Q. I know. (laughter) It seems that textile arts are highly regarded in Japan. In U.S. textile arts seem to be viewed

as a specialized form of art – a craft – not held in the same esteem as say oil painting. Speak to this difference, if you, in fact, find there to be this difference.

The Japanese do value the work of the hand, for sure. Rozome is where the painters of the fiber arts in Japan are. They're the ones who are able to create paintings – very strong and dynamic paintings. There is great respect for the art of the kimono. Even currently, I know of young women getting married with great wishes to have a minimum of 12 kimono in their "hope chest" if they want to go in a traditional way. Purchasing a kimono is similar to purchasing a car. Except it's a better investment because the grandmother passes it down to the daughter and the granddaughter and they don't go out of style. So they are an investment in art. That's kimono.

There's not that separation between art and craft, which is something that's been discussed for 40 or 50 years in the U.S. and has become somewhat tiresome. There's utilitarian art or utilitarian craft, but work that is presented as wall hangings or to be hung as tapestries, no matter what the material, is fine art.



When I run into people who say that they don't respect it here, I say, 'you present it with respect'. You respect it as well. Present it with confidence and professional quality and I think things will begin to turn around. I've already seen that.

Q. What are the typical tools that we would find on your table for painting?

There is no table!!! I sit on a cushion on the floor. I lived on the floor when I was in Japan. And I still do my work there from the floor. With my silk stretched across my cushion, I can slip right underneath the stretched fabric. My wax brushes, my dyeing brushes, they're all from Japan. My wax pot is an electric tempura pot from Japan. The acid dyes that I mix up myself from powder into a liquid stock solution are also from Japan. I am now doing more and more work stenciling. It's called *Ro-kata*. I just finished a DVD on that topic. I have paper and cutting tools and designs for transferring. *Ro-Kata* is something that, although it has an ancient history, it's really only been seen more recently.

Q. You say your dyes are from Japan. You don't use the same kinds of dyes as silk painting dyes?

I use the same kind of dyes. I buy my own powders and mix it up with water. They are acid dyes like your dyes Pebeo, Jacquard or Tinfix dyes. But the ones I bring from Japan seem to be more potent and stronger. I import them myself. They last a long time. What I did find out when I worked with silk painters – and I use silk painter dyes when I'm teaching a

group with good results -- is that the Japanese have a secret for making those dyes last longer. And that's to size the fabric with soybean sizing, with gojiru, which is what they use in the kimono industry. They take soybeans, soak them, grind them and use the juice from them to size the silk before applying the dyes. After everything's dried, I steam the silk.

I have heard of people steaming up to 4 hours. We did tests with all of the acid dyes available. After an hour and 15 minutes of steaming we ended up with virtually no washout whatsoever because of that gojiru sizing. We didn't have very much dye going down the drain. It's a wonderful secret that I love sharing with silk painters. (See p.8 for recipe.)

Q. Your calligraphy work, that is an art form in itself.

Most definitely. It's the same brush as the wax brush that I use. Every Japanese person learns calligraphy in elementary school. So the Japanese are very good with brushes. It's a meditative practice. It's called *Shodo*.

Q. I'm sure you still have friends in Japan? How are they handling the earthquake/tsunami after effects?

I was opening a solo show down in Indonesia in Bali when the tsunami hit and the disaster happened. Five of my friends from Japan had come down for the opening. So the exhibition was very much tinged by wanting to know what was happening and how everybody was. They're a stalwart people. Just absolutely amazing. They're coming through fine. And Kyoto -- which is where I studied and lived, I have heard has very few problems. Of course what happened, flowed across the entire country with worry and concern. In Kyoto, there were power outages but that was about it.

Q. What led you to write the book, "The World of Rozome?"

Students. I came back to the U.S. one summer, in 1991 to teach at a Surface Design Conference. After teaching 16 students in that class -- Susan Louise Moyer was in the group -- the students asked, "Where can we see more of this beautiful technique and more of this art?" I said, not here; in Japan. They told me I should write a book.

Ironically, a publisher in Japan, Kodansha International Publishers, had asked me if I would be willing to do it. I went to them and told them that my students said I should take them up on their offer. I have a bit of a missionary feeling, of having the opportunity to see this wonderful work in Japan and wanting others to see and share it.

Q. Rozome sounds like an art form that takes lots of practice. How long did it take you to master this art form? Or do you consider yourself a master?

I'm called a master, after 35 years. But I'm humbled by that. How long? Will we ever 'master' it? Like others here and in Japan who are seriouswe work with it every day. We learn things from it constantly. But to have some real confidence in doing it.... I think 5 years, maybe 10.

It's a matter of knowing the silks that you're working with; knowing the dye groups that you're working with and your



color sense. Behind that you must have a strong sense of design and drawing skills. Often people that take my classes, I tell them that besides doing fiber classes, they should be taking drawing and design classes.

I think that the process pulls us in -- the lusciousness of the silk, the richness of the colors. But we have to have something to say with it. You have to have the hand and the eye to paint it.

My advice is to sketch regularly, because you just get better and better. The same way as working with dye and silk. You just get better and better. But you just need to practice.

Q. You teach rozome at MassArt?

I teach both shibori and rozome, two of the Japanese resist processes. We work with cotton and silk; with fiber reactive dyes on the cotton, and acid dyes on the silk.

MassArt has perhaps one of the best wax resist set-ups possible. That is where the world Batik Conference was held in 2005 that I helped to coordinate. People from 28 different countries came. Ten of the artists from Japan came and taught. We had people from every continent except Antarctica there working. It was quite an amazing conference.

Q. Do you have any plans to do something like that again?

Ahhh. I tell people that was a once in a lifetime thing.

Q. In closing?

There is a tremendous connection between the silk painters and those that work with wax resist. I think we have a lot to learn from each other. So I hope we will see more interest and more crossover in the future.

Find more information about Kira's work at her website at www.betsysterlingbenjamin.com