

## JAPANESE ENCHANTMENT

New Hampshire artist Kiranada uses ancient techniques to turn silk into luminous expressions of color and place

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**B**ETSY STERLING BENJAMIN IS RELUCTANT to call herself a “master.” In Japan, the word is reserved for only a select group of the most highly skilled artists, but admirers of her work often have no such hesitation. The New Hampshire-based textile artist is skilled in the ancient art of *rozome* (pronounced ro-ZO-may), a process she describes as painting with “hot wax and liquid dyes on thirsty cloth.”

Ordained into the Western Buddhist Order of monks last April, Sterling Benjamin now prefers her Buddhist name Kiranada, which means “she who gives or radiates moonlight.”

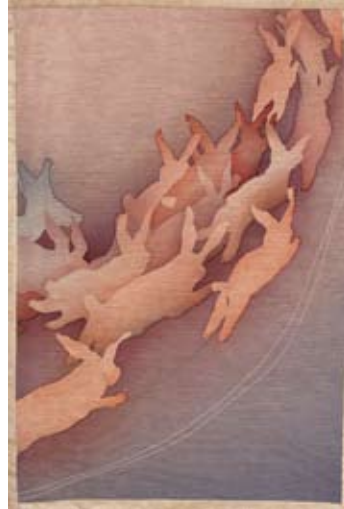
“Her artwork is exquisitely beautiful, natural and refined, thoughtful and profound,” says Dayanandi, the monk who ordained Kiranada in a ceremony in Spain. “I had a sense of her artwork being as beautiful as moonlight falling through the branches of trees in a forest at night — mysterious, subtle, illuminating.”

The documented history of *rozome*, the application of molten wax to fabric to block out an area so that it resists dye, dates back 2,500 years, though some scholars claim the technique is older. Wax-resistant textiles have been found in Egypt, Syria, Central Asia, and China, and ancient pieces range from garments with small patterns to large tapestries made to decorate religious buildings, as well as the private homes of aristocrats.

It is believed that the Chinese originally taught the wax-resist treatment to the Japanese, who then turned batik (the term most English speakers use to identify these types of textiles) into *rozome*, a more creative form. “Batik is Indonesian for the wax-resistant process,” says Kiranada, noting it is typically an ethnically grounded craft, with much of the textile art used as clothing. “*Rozome*,” she says, “is a much more exquisite and refined expression and is presented more as paintings.” Further emphasizing the complexity of the art, Fukumoto Shigeki, a Japanese master of *rozome* and a professor at Osaka University of Arts, says that “this instant process permits no second tries. This is the hidden enchantment of *rozome*.”

**IN HER NEW HAMPSHIRE studio, artist Betsy Sterling Benjamin works on a rozome piece. Rubber brayers, natural brushes, and other tools are spread out next to a heated pot of wax. Sterling Benjamin, who prefers her Buddhist name Kiranada, wears a rozome scarf.**





When introduced to the technique, Kiranada was immediately enchanted. In 1981, she planned an 18-month trip to Kyoto, Japan, to continue her study of the design and construction of kimonos. However, once she discovered the art of *rozome*, she stayed for 18 years, immersing herself in the culture and artistry of her host country and teaching English

**THE ROZOME PANELS above were part of Kiranada's "A Sense of Place, An Artist's Tribute to the Seven Continents" exhibit at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. They are (FROM LEFT), "Asian Leaves," "Asian Sachiko," "Australian Rabbits," and "Australian Coral." The "Song of Silence Scroll" (FACING PAGE) hangs in Kiranada's New Hampshire studio.**

to support herself while learning from a number of *rozome* masters.

"I had the opportunity to see the finest work in this field and to personally know the masters of the *rozome* technique," said the artist in an interview in the members' magazine of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, where her work is in the permanent collection.

Her teachers, Master Dyer Yusuke Tange of Kyoto among them, recognized the rhythm in her work, which grew to include *kesas* (the ceremonial robe worn by Buddhist monks), scrolls, tapestries, and paintings. Her choice of colors, including a gold powder called *kinsai*, her use of silk for the background, and her strong yet delicate strokes all combined to give her *rozome*

a rare luminosity. As she became schooled in technique, she began to confidently infuse pieces with her own unique sensibilities. She received several grants to continue her studies as well as to travel and lecture about Japanese costume history. She also had her work shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions.

In 2000, she created seven *rozome kesas*, representing the seven continents, to be worn by Buddhist monks to celebrate the millennium. "I wanted to create work that could transform thinking and bring an appreciation of both this wondrous earth we live on and its fragility," says the artist of the project. "As caretakers of this earth, I felt it was time for us to wake up. And soft glowing silk was my medium."

The Peabody Essex Museum exhibited the pieces in "A Sense of Place, An Artist's Tribute to the Seven Continents," a yearlong show that opened in 2006. The museum then purchased six of the seven pieces, while the artist kept one for her private collection.

"They are a major addition to our textile collection," says Jane Winchell, who was curator for the *kesas* exhibit. "They represent the artist's aesthetic design with an international perspective."

Kiranada's studio in Kingston, New Hampshire, is open by appointment between April and November. There, visitors



can observe the *rozome* process and view the artist's scrolls, tapestries, paintings, and screens, along with smaller pieces such as scarves and ties, all of which are for sale. Kiranada, who teaches at Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston, also does work on commission and will do consultations with interior designers.

In finishing a number of pieces she had started before her ordination, Kiranada has brought new vision and spirituality to her *rozome*. "My ordination has brought this process, this movement, into consciousness even more," she says. "It includes a dedication to do all I can to 'wake up,' to embody compassion, and to share myself and my vehicle of communication, my art, within this lifetime." ■

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*The World of Rozome: Wax-Resist Textiles of Japan*, by Betsy Sterling Benjamin, has been reissued in a CD format with two new chapters, "Japanese Emerging Artists" and "New Soywax Techniques." More information on the artist and her work is available on her website, [betsysterlingbenjamin.com](http://betsysterlingbenjamin.com).