

Images of Vietnam in the art of *katazome*, by TOBA Mika

The Artist



In commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Japan-Vietnam Diplomatic Relations, the Fine Arts Museum Ho Chi Minh City hosted the exhibition 'Sceneries remained forever in one's soul' from 23 November to 15 December 2013, displaying the works of the Japanese artist TOBA Mika. Deeply inspired by her various journeys to Vietnam starting in 1994, the artist creates colourful, impressive and thought-provoking images of a land in transition by using *katazome* – a centuries old unique Japanese dyeing technique.¹

Stefan Jeka



BORN IN AICHI PREFECTURE, TOBA Mika 鳥羽美花 graduated from Kyoto City University of Arts in 1987. At that time she had already developed her very own approach to the old dyeing technique *katazome* 型染め, reviving the traditional craft to use it for her contemporary art. Prior to her graduation her works were shown in exhibitions throughout the country – at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum and the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art – and she won several art prizes in Japan, like the ‘Kyoto New Artist Prize’ in 2002 and the ‘Urban Culture Incentive Award’ in 2003. Her remarkable works focusing on Vietnam were also exhibited abroad at the Vietnam National Museum in Hanoi, and in 2005 TOBA Mika was eventually awarded with the ‘Cultural Testimonial Award’ by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As a current professor at Kyoto Seika University of Arts, TOBA Mika is able to personally introduce this old tradition to her students.

Katazome – dyed patterns

Among the several elaborate dyeing techniques, *katazome* – the term could be translated as ‘stencil dyed’ – is a particular example of Japanese wits and craftsmanship. Resembling the expensive woven brocades, *katazome* was used to dye inexpensive cotton or linen garments. Therefore it gained wide popularity and was produced in large quantities to meet the growing demand among the commoners in early modern Japan. Like the famous batik dyeing method of Indonesia, the fabric is partially covered with a resist to hinder the applied colour from penetrating the parts where it is not desired. This technique produces well-defined patterns, that resemble sharp edged prints rather than painted designs.

In batik these patterns are realised by applying liquid wax by hand or stencils. This method of using wax was not practised in Japan, perhaps the production of wax was not sufficient or the wax was used for other purposes, for example, the fabrication of medicine. Instead, the resist paste used in *katazome* is mainly based on the abundant raw materials rice and rice bran.

To briefly describe the complex process used by TOBA Mika, the resist paste is applied to a silk textile by brushing it through the patterned stencil cuts of a sheet of mulberry paper, the *katagami* 型紙. The paper is first treated with *kakishibu* 柿渋 – a tannin made from the persimmon fruit – to enhance its durability, and then firmly placed on the fabric. After applying the paste the paper is removed, exposing the areas to be coloured later on. The cloth is then left to soak in soybean juice overnight (*jiire* 地入れ, ‘put into ground’). This procedure keeps the resist from cracking and, working as an undercoat, it prevents the blotting of the dye and intensifies the colours. Then, after applying the dye and steaming the cloth at high temperature to fixate the colours, the spectacular moment of washing – *mizumoto* 水元 ‘to dip in water’ – comes: “Katazome is, indeed, a very dramatic method because all of the colored patterns will appear at one single moment of removing the resist.”²

Depending on the size of the picture, cutting the stencil – *katahori* 型堀り, ‘dig out the pattern’ – can take up to two months from start to finish. As several of these steps are necessary when more colours or patterns are desired, the creation of even a single picture becomes a very complex and time-consuming endeavour. Though the *katagami* is quite durable and can be used several times, the outcome will be unique each time.

Fading old Vietnam as reviving inspiration

When TOBA Mika realised that the traditional *katazome* designs – mainly flowers, abstract patterns or scenes of folk and popular tales – did not any longer contribute to the development of her artwork, she took a flight to Ho Chi Minh City in 1994 in search of new inspiration. She went there without any real idea about the country or people, but from the first moment TOBA Mika was enchanted and inspired by the vigour, the heat and the landscape of the city.

From then on, she visited Vietnam every year and travelled around the country from north to south, to tiny fishing villages, to paddy fields, the old imperial town of Hue and, of course, the cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon. It was the time when Vietnam had begun to undergo vast changes due to the rapid economic development the government pursued with the *Đổi mới* (‘renewal’) reforms. Starting in 1986 these reforms eventually led to a so-called socialist-orientated market economy and the growth of private enterprises, emerging from the existing shadow market of family oriented enterprises. But, alas, this development in one way or the other influenced the sceneries TOBA Mika witnessed and the places she selected for her paintings, and very often these would no longer exist upon her return. Stimulated by the rapid and dramatic changes in scenery, she felt she simply *had* to paint to keep hold of the memories of the moment – place and time. The objects of her pictures were precious and yet so very fragile. The streets, houses, landscapes, they contained the real essence of the Vietnamese history. TOBA Mika explained: “The houses opposite of the river were as if they were telling the history of the journey of the Vietnamese people. The decaying houses with the French

colonial style buildings behind them seemed like living artworks. It was the scenery I painted for the picture ‘Monsoon’, but as time passed the scene was completely gone, replaced by a highway.”³

Assembling the patterns of life

‘Monsoon’ (モンスーン, 1998) is an impressive work consisting of six panels, more than 5 meters in length. Many of her artworks come in the form of a *byōbu* 屏風, a traditional Japanese folding screen – reminiscent of the heritage of the Japanese arts TOBA Mika pays tribute to. Although the seemingly deserted colonial houses in ‘Monsoon’, with their dark empty windows, and the nearly collapsing roofs of the crooked stilt houses in front, give us a somewhat dreary and desolate impression, the focal point is a bright awning that covers the freshly laundered clothes hanging out to dry. The absence of people is a distinct feature of nearly all of her works, but like in ‘Monsoon’ or ‘Labyrinth’ (迷宮都市, 1998) the decaying houses and empty streets are nevertheless filled with life – represented by the bright yellow lights shining from inside a shop, a set of chairs, parked bikes or motorbikes and boats floating on a river, all just waiting for the imminent return of the people onto the scene. In this regard, because of the intimate and personal relationship with the landscapes depicted, her pictures focusing on Vietnam are filled with neither nostalgia nor sadness, but rather with an idea of future expectations. TOBA Mika is witness to the inevitable historical process happening in Vietnam at this very moment, which in contrast to that process she tries to catch by using the elaborate and time-consuming process of the *katazome* technique.

Keeping the before mentioned process in mind, large sized paintings require more effort. But, TOBA Mika felt as if the Vietnamese sceneries she wanted to draw demanded such proportions: “So, it requires a lot of hard work to produce a large scale painting, but somehow, the Vietnamese sceneries I wanted to paint seem to fit only to a large scale art work. The energy of the Vietnamese life and the heat of the city, they all gave me a lot of power.”⁴

It is the large size of the paintings that allow the viewer to stand back, at a distance, and take in the astonishing effect of the abstract puzzle of sharp edged coloured fields forging themselves together into a coherent image. It is this combination of abstractionism and photo realism that makes her work such an impressive experience.

Current works and future projects

At the time of this interview TOBA Mika had already begun working on a special project; presumably for the first time, the *katazome* technique will be used for the painting of *fusuma-e* 襖絵 (panelled sliding doors) for the Zen-temple Kennin-ji in Kyoto. In preparation for the 800th anniversary of the death of monk Eisai (1141-1215) in 2015, sixteen panels for the temple’s small library room will be decorated by the artist and shown in the exhibition ‘TOBA Mika – dyeing the ZEN spirit’ at the temple from 29 November till 14 December 2014. Again, much of her inspiration derives from her journeys



to Vietnam, for it is the tranquil image of the mountains and waters in a small Vietnamese village that she finds most appropriate for the *fusuma-e* in the oldest Zen-temple in Kyoto. In the project’s second phase another 36 panels of *fusuma-e* are to be completed for the temple’s large library room, depicting the four seasons in various Japanese landscapes.

TOBA Mika also has plans to present her work in France in the near future. There she wants to show panels from her current project at the temple in Kyoto, as well as her works that were inspired by her various travels through Vietnam. This will be a fine selection from what she has produced in the past twenty years and the first opportunity to experience her art in Europe.

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References

- 1 This article is based on both personal and online interviews with the artist and used with her kind permission. General information about the artist and her work was mostly derived from the artist’s website (toba-mika.net) and the catalogue from the exhibition *Nara and Hanoi bound together with Katazome*, held in commemoration of the 1300th anniversary of Nara Heijo-kyo and 1000th anniversary of Thang Long-Hanoi at the Yakushi Temple in Nara and the Temple of Literature and the Vietnam National Museum of Arts in Hanoi in 2010.
- 2 Committee for the Toba Mika’s *Katazome* Exhibition (ed.) 2010. *Nara and Hanoi bound together with Katazome* (Exhibition Catalogue), Tokyo: Sankei Shimbun sha, p.111
- 3 Interview, January 2014
- 4 idem

Fig 1:
モンスーン/Monsoon
6-panel byōbu, 1998
233 x 524 cm

Fig 2:
迷宮都市/Labyrinth
2-panel byōbu, 1998
160 x 200 cm
Hanoi, Embassy
of Japan.

Fig 3:
The artist TOBA
Mika at a garden
in Ken’nin-ji, Kyoto
Exhibition poster
鳥羽美花一禅を染める
/TOBA Mika – dyeing
the ZEN spirit.

Fig 4:
辿りついた場所 I-III
/Eternal place I-III
(from left to right)
4-panel byōbu, 2013
210 x 300 cm each
Picture taken at
the exhibition in
Ho Chi Minh City
Museum of Fine Arts
November 2013.

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