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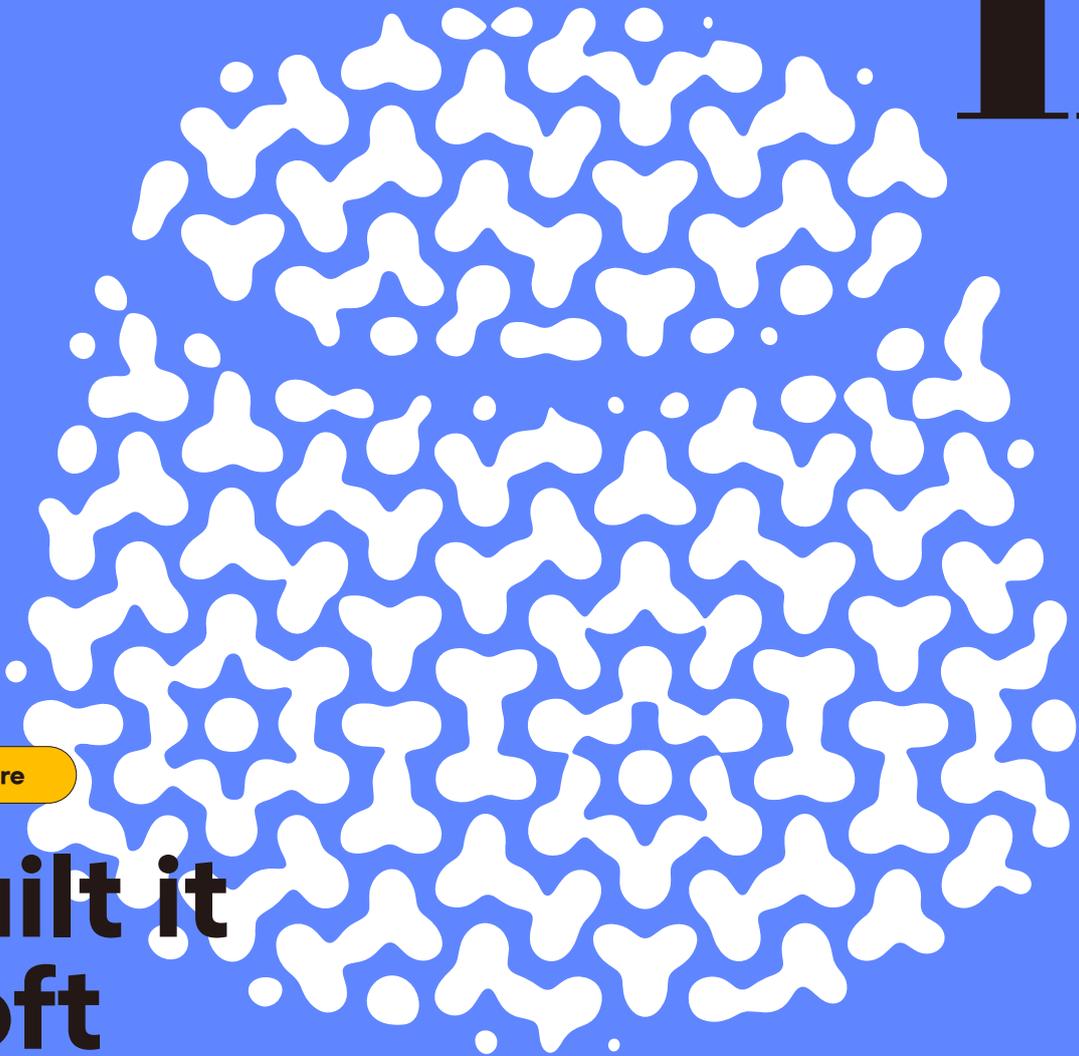
# Monthly JP pavilion

Issue

11

Feature

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## Feature

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### **The Timeless Spirit of Sustainability Inherited by Ise Jingu**

Exploring Insights for a Circular Society from the Shikinen Sengu, a Ritual Passed Down for Over 1,300 Years at Ise Jingu.

P. 04



### **Timeless and Borderless: The Enduring Value of Japanese Needlework and the Circular Spirit of Sashiko**

Exploring the Appeal of "Sashiko": The Timeless Japanese Craft Embodying Sustainability and Captivating Audiences Worldwide.

P. 13



# The Timeless Spirit of Sustainability Inherited by Ise Jingu



## Index

- Ise Jingu's Greatest Sacred Ritual, an Eight-Year Endeavor.....	5
- Embodying the Spirit of "Tokowaka" by Intentionally Using Fragile Materials.....	7
- The Long History of Ise Jingu: Interwoven with the Cycle of Water.....	9

Actionately known as “O-Ise-san,” Ise Jingu in Ise City, Mie Prefecture, is a revered Shinto shrine widely recognized throughout Japan. For over 1,300 years, a sacred tradition has been passed down at this historic site — the Shikinen Sengu. This ritual, held once every 20 years, involves the complete reconstruction of the shrine’s buildings, with the 63rd iteration set to take place in 2033. Embedded in this practice is the Japanese philosophical concept of “Tokowaka”, a principle that emphasizes remaining perpetually fresh while preserving traditional forms. This idea resonates deeply with modern sustainability ideals. What significance did our ancestors find in the Shikinen Sengu, and what compelled them to uphold this tradition across countless generations? By tracing the essence of this enduring custom, we may uncover valuable insights that could guide us in building a sustainable, circular society rooted in Japan’s cultural wisdom.



## Ise Jingu’s Greatest Sacred Ritual, an Eight-Year Endeavor

The Shikinen Sengu is a sacred ritual that has been faithfully carried out at Ise Jingu for centuries. The term “Sengu” refers to the act of “relocating the deity from the old sanctuary to a newly constructed one,” while “Shikinen” means “a fixed, designated year.” Despite its 1,300-year history, the exact reason why this ritual began remains a mystery to this day. However, Kiyomi Chikusa, an author who has written extensively about Ise Jingu, suggests that “examining the historical context may offer some clues.”

**Chikusa** The Shikinen Sengu was institutionalized under the initiative of Emperor Tenmu. At the time, Chinese culture was rapidly flowing into Japan and the nation was undergoing significant upheaval. Amid this turbulent period, the question arose: What could be done to unify the country? The answer that emerged may well have been the Shikinen Sengu — a national project designed to achieve that purpose.



The newly reconstructed main sanctuary on the left, and the main sanctuary after 20 years on the right.

The Shikinen Sengu can be described as a kind of “divine relocation.” While this may sound simple, the preparations are remarkably extensive. In addition to constructing a new main sanctuary, around 170 structures — including auxiliary shrines and torii gates — are rebuilt in their entirety. The preparation period alone spans eight years, during which more than 30 sacred rituals and ceremonies take place.



The Yamaguchi-sai is a ritual held to pray to the deity enshrined at the entrance of Misomayama, the sacred mountain where timber for the new sanctuary is sourced.

Among the many sacred rituals, one that Kiyomi Chikusa recalls as being “particularly memorable” is the Misomahajime-sai, the ceremony marking the first cutting of timber for the new sanctuary. The hinoki cypress felled during this ritual is used to craft the vessel that houses the sacred object of worship.

**Chikusa** There was a small branch from the tree’s crown placed on the stump of the felled tree. Curious, I asked the Somagashira (head woodsman) about it, and he explained, “Since we have taken a tree from the mountain, this is a gesture of gratitude to the mountain deity.” Realizing that this deep-rooted Japanese reverence for nature continues to be passed down to this day truly moved me.



Left: During the Misomahajime-sai, two hinoki cypress trees are felled following traditional methods passed down through generations. / Right: The custom known as "Tobusa-tate", in which a branch from the tree's crown is placed upright on the stump — a ritual witnessed by Kiyomi Chikusa



## Embodying the Spirit of "Tokowaka" by Intentionally Using Fragile Materials

Compared to ancient landmarks like the Parthenon in Greece or the Pyramids of Egypt, the sanctuaries of Ise Jingu appear strikingly simple and unassuming. The primary materials used for the main sanctuary are hinoki cypress and kaya (a type of thatch), and the architectural style follows the "Yuiitsu Shinmei-zukuri" design, which evolved from traditional raised-floor granaries. The wooden structures are left in their natural state as shiraki (un finished wood), and the thatched roof resembles an inverted open book. Moreover, unlike the Parthenon or the Pyramids, no foundation stones are laid beneath the structure; instead, the supporting pillars are embedded directly into the ground in a hottate-shiki (earth-set post) style. In contrast to the imposing permanence of other ancient monuments, Ise Jingu's simplicity may even strike some as fragile or fleeting.



You can see that the pillars are embedded directly into the ground.

Using materials with limited durability, the structures are repeatedly rebuilt, dismantled, and rebuilt again. At first glance, this may seem like a labor-intensive and inefficient process. However, this cycle embodies a profound concept known in Shinto as “Tokowaka”, a special spiritual principle that holds deep significance.

**Chikusa** “Tokowaka” refers to a state of perpetual youthfulness. However, it’s not about physical age — rather, it signifies a spirit that remains ever fresh and vibrant. By enshrining the deity in a newly built sanctuary, the belief is that the divine presence is renewed and empowered. I believe this intention lies at the heart of the practice. Additionally, just as a shrine’s daily routine begins with cleaning, Shinto places great value on maintaining a pure and unblemished space. This reverence for cleanliness may also be closely tied to the concept of Tokowaka.

The Shikinen Sengu ritual once faced the threat of discontinuation during the turbulent Sengoku period. After a hiatus of approximately 130 years, it was revived in the Azuchi-Momoyama period. Later, although postponed for four years due to the impact of World War II, the ritual has continued uninterrupted to this day.

**Chikusa** It’s truly impressive that the Shikinen Sengu was successfully revived after being suspended for over a century. However, it seems that even during the period of interruption, they managed to sustain the tradition by conducting temporary enshrinements and carrying out repairs and maintenance as needed.

Even with periods of interruption, the fact that this ritual has continued unbroken for 1,300 years is truly remarkable — a unique and noteworthy achievement in the history of human civilization. Why, then, did our ancestors place such profound importance on the act of rebuilding?

**Chikusa** It’s difficult to put into words... but for me, I felt I grasped the essence of the Shikinen Sengu during the Ujibashi Watarihajime-shiki — the ceremony marking the crossing of the newly rebuilt Uji Bridge, which leads to the Inner Shrine and is reconstructed as part of the Shikinen Sengu. When I crossed the freshly built Uji Bridge, I was enveloped by the gentle scent of wood, and it felt as though my heart had been purified. The air was crisp and clear, filling the surroundings with a refreshing atmosphere that naturally brought a smile to my face. I imagine that this uplifting feeling — the sense of renewal and positivity that arises when encountering something new — must have resonated deeply with people in the past as well.



The newly reconstructed Uji Bridge from the previous Shikinen Sengu, completed in 2009.

The structures of Ise Jingu are built with the promise of being reborn 20 years later. This continuity itself is the embodiment of “Tokowaka”, reminding us that the past, present, and future are all connected in an unbroken cycle.

While this concept may seem solemn and profound, it’s actually quite relatable when we look at everyday life. For instance, cherry blossoms bloom, fall, and then return the following year just as beautifully. Similarly, rice fields are harvested, then replanted with new seedlings, leading to the next fruitful season. This continuous cycle — where the old gives way to the new — is the very essence of the “Tokowaka” spirit.



## The Long History of Ise Jingu: Interwoven with the Cycle of Water

The rebuilding process of the Shikinen Sengu requires approximately 13,000 hinoki cypress trees as sacred timber. Each tree is carefully selected by Jingu Gishi (Ise Jingu’s master craftsmen) and is of the highest quality. These trees are then milled into various components, both large and small — an astonishing total of around 100,000 pieces.

**Chikusa** The construction process employs a traditional technique known as “Kigumi”, a method of joining wood pieces together like a puzzle, with minimal use of nails. This approach not only simplifies dismantling but also allows for a trial assembly before the final construction of the main sanctuary. In a way, this technique can be seen as an early form of recycling, designed to facilitate the reuse of materials.



The sanctuary is constructed by hand-assembling approximately 100,000 wooden components, all meticulously crafted from around 13,000 hinoki cypress trees.

The old materials from dismantled buildings are reused as much as possible. For example, the thick pillars from the main sanctuaries of the Outer Shrine (Geku) and Inner Shrine (Naiku) are repurposed as torii gates for Uji Bridge. Twenty years later, these torii gates are further reused — one becoming the torii at Shichiri no Watashi in Kuwana City, Mie Prefecture, and the other at Seki no Oiwake in Kameyama City, Mie Prefecture.

**Chikusa** Ise Jingu has been practicing recycling and sustainability for over a thousand years. Visiting shrines that have inherited these reused materials is one of the enjoyable aspects of the experience. Given my line of work, I often visit shrines for research, and each time, I find myself investigating their connections to Ise Jingu.

Kiyomi Chikusa further remarks, “The history of Ise Jingu is deeply intertwined with the concept of circulation.” A symbolic representation of this idea is the Miyuiki Forest, which extends behind the shrine’s sanctuaries. This vast expanse of woodland is large enough to encompass the entire Adachi Ward in Tokyo and covers one-fourth of Ise City. Many areas within the forest are no-limits, including sacred zones that remain untouched. This preserved environment has fostered a rich and diverse ecosystem.

When rain falls on the Miyuiki Forest, the water seeps into the soil and eventually flows into the Isuzu River, a first-class river. The river’s currents carry minerals downstream into Ise Bay. From there, the evaporated seawater forms rain clouds that once again nourish the Miyuiki Forest. Leveraging this natural water cycle, Ise Jingu cultivates rice, vegetables, and other crops — a practice that beautifully reflects the harmony between the shrine and its environment.



The Jingu Shinden, a sacred rice field that has been cultivating rice for offerings to Amaterasu Omikami for over 2,000 years. The rice is grown using water from the Isuzu River.

**Chikusa** The offerings dedicated to the deities, such as rice and vegetables, are essentially self-sufficient. Additionally, seafood harvested from Ise Bay is also presented before the divine. This is why preserving the forests and waterways is essential for sustaining these sacred rituals.

Ise Jingu has been actively preserving and managing the Miyuiki Forest to achieve self-sufficiency in producing hinoki cypress for sacred timber. While the forest originally supplied the necessary wood, its resources eventually became depleted, prompting the shrine to source timber from the Kiso mountains (spanning Gifu and Nagano prefectures) from the Edo period onward.

In 1923, the Jingu Forest Management Plan was established to restore and cultivate hinoki from scratch. However, it takes approximately 200 years for these trees to mature into timber suitable for the shrine's pillars. Currently, the project has reached its halfway point, with regular thinning and replanting efforts underway.

With 100 years remaining until completion, this endeavor stretches far beyond the lifespan of a single generation — or even two. Those planting seedlings today will never witness the project's final outcome. Moreover, only a small portion of the saplings will grow into timber of suitable quality.

Just as people a century ago entrusted their efforts to the future by planting trees, today's work will lay the foundation for a forest that will thrive 100 years from now.



The Isuzu River flowing through the grounds of Ise Jingu.

The Shikinen Sengu, which embodies the unique value of “changing to remain unchanged,” and the continuous cycle of nature — both are grand mechanisms that create purity and resonate deeply with one another. Reflecting on this connection adds greater weight to Kiyomi Chikusa’s words: “Nature itself is the very foundation of Ise Jingu.” The fact that the Shikinen Sengu has been carried on for over 1,300 years suggests that our ancestors must have found a profound sense of harmony with nature in this practice — one that brought them a universal sense of reassurance.

The “Tokowaka” spirit, passed down through generations, holds renewed significance in today’s world, where a shift toward a circular society is increasingly essential. As a uniquely Japanese philosophy and practice, it continues to shine ever brighter, offering timeless wisdom for the future.



## Kiyomi Chikusa

Born in Tsu City, Mie Prefecture. After working as a news assistant for NHK Tsu’s 630 News and serving as the editor-in-chief of the regional magazine Ise Shima, she transitioned to a career in writing. Chikusa is actively engaged in lectures and writing about Japanese culture, including Ise Jingu, traditional festivals, and seasonal customs. For eight years, she contributed the series “Ise, the Eternal Sacred Land” to the Shinkansen onboard magazine Monthly Hitotoki.



# Timeless and Borderless: The Enduring Value of Japanese Needlework and the Circular Spirit of Sashiko



## Index

- The Beauty of the Old:  
How Japanese Craftsmanship Resonated  
with British Artisans..... 14
- The Beauty of "Boro":  
Embracing Japan's Cultural Aesthetic..... 16
- "Tsugaru Kogin-zashi":  
A Craft Woven by Rural Women ..... 17
- "Did They Change Their Mind...?"  
— Traces of the Artisan's Humanity Found in the Details ..... 18

Sashiko, a traditional Japanese technique for reinforcing and repairing fabric, has its roots in the wisdom of everyday life in Japan's Tohoku region over 200 years ago during the Edo period. Today, this age-old craft is gaining renewed attention both in Japan and abroad for its sustainable nature and striking beauty. What is it about sashiko that continues to captivate people across generations?

We spoke with two experts to explore its enduring appeal: Masahiko Morikawa, founder of Studio Masachuka, a UK-based repair service that incorporates sashiko techniques, and Sachie Kubo of the Suntory Museum of Art, who shares the cultural heritage of Tsugaru Kogin-zashi, a traditional embroidery craft, through her collection and exhibitions. Each offers a unique perspective on the timeless charm of sashiko.

Long before the concept of sustainability became a global conversation, anonymous artisans created exquisite embroidery that embodies this very principle. Each stitch carries the thoughts and care of its maker — a quiet yet profound testament to their ingenuity and artistry.

Top Visual: "Higashi Kogin Kimono, Edo to Meiji Period, 19th Century" / Courtesy of the Suntory Museum of Art



## The Beauty of the Old: How Japanese Craftsmanship Resonated with British Artisans

Sashiko is a traditional Japanese technique for reinforcing and repairing fabric, which developed primarily in rural communities. Originating over 200 years ago, this technique was widely used across Japan to mend worn-out work clothes and household items.

Although sashiko emerged out of necessity for practical repairs, it has since evolved beyond its original purpose. Today, sashiko is valued not only for its durability but also for its decorative appeal, finding its way into fashion and interior design.

In 2012, Masahiko Morikawa opened Studio Masachuka in the UK, where he runs his own brand and offers a sashiko-based clothing repair service. In 2022, he was approached by UNIQLO EU to introduce a clothing repair service, which led to a collaboration titled "RE. UNIQLO STUDIO", launched as an in-store initiative. This service has since gained popularity and expanded to five countries: the UK, Germany, Denmark, Italy, and Spain. How does Morikawa perceive the growing popularity of sashiko in Europe?

### — What do you think is the reason behind sashiko gaining attention overseas, Mr. Morikawa?

**Morikawa** I believe sashiko is attracting attention not only for its design appeal in fashion but also from a sustainability perspective. The trend is particularly strong in the UK. The country has a rich tailoring tradition, notably in areas like Savile Row, where master tailors are highly regarded, and there's a deep appreciation for sewing techniques. For many, Japan's traditional repair methods — some thing rarely seen in Europe — feel fresh and inspiring from the perspectives of design, craftsmanship, and even spirituality.



A vintage garment repaired with sashiko by Studio Masachuka.

— **Would you say that the popularity of sashiko is mainly spreading among certain groups, such as those in the fashion industry or clothing designers?**

**Morikawa** No, that's not the case at all. Our in-store workshops attract a diverse range of participants, and I feel sashiko is being widely embraced by people from all walks of life.

In the UK, there's a popular reality show called "The Great British Sewing Bee", which focuses on sewing. Sashiko was once featured on the show, and that exposure significantly raised its profile.

Recently, I've even met people who are familiar with highly specialized Japanese embroidery techniques — ones that even many Japanese people may not know about.

— **It's fascinating to see traditional Japanese techniques being embraced in Europe.**

**Morikawa** That's right. I believe one major reason is that the idea of cherishing old things is deeply rooted in European culture.

In Japan, there's a tendency to place higher value on new items, with the perception that their value diminishes the more they're used. The way property prices drop as soon as a house becomes "secondhand" is a clear reflection of this mindset.

In contrast, Europe has a strong cultural appreciation for antiques and older items. In the case of housing, it's been common practice to repair and maintain homes for over a century. The same goes for clothing — instead of replacing garments with new ones, people often repair and continue wearing a beloved jacket or find value in vintage clothing, passing older pieces down through generations.

At RE.UNIQLO STUDIO, in addition to sashiko repairs, we also remake clothing using techniques such as indigo dyeing and shibori (tie-dye), reselling these reimagined pieces.



RE.UNIQLO STUDIO at UNIQLO's Regent Street store in London — a space that once served as a barbershop in the 1920s, now reborn with a new purpose.



## The Beauty of “Boro”: Embracing Japan’s Cultural Aesthetic

— You mentioned that sashiko is gaining recognition not only for its sustainability and technical aspects but also for its design appeal. Could you elaborate on what specific elements people find so captivating?

**Morikawa** Stitching white thread onto faded, tattered fabric — the beauty created through sashiko is quite different from the “glittering elegance” often associated with European aesthetics. In Japan, concepts like “wabi” and “sabi” capture the charm that emerges through aging and wear, and I believe this is what resonates as a “profound beauty” for many people overseas.”

That said, sashiko was originally born out of practical necessity in everyday life. Beyond its visual appeal, I hope to share the cultural significance behind it — a story of resilience, mindfulness, and tradition that reflects Japanese values.

— In order to convey not only the aesthetic appeal but also the cultural background of sashiko, what kind of activities do you plan to pursue in the future?

**Morikawa** In May 2025, an event called “London Craft Week” will be held in London, and I’m planning to showcase works featuring Tsugaru Kogin-zashi, a traditional form of sashiko embroidery, as well as organize workshops with contemporary artists.

Tsugaru Kogin-zashi emerged during the long, harsh winters when people were confined indoors, and each region and family has its own distinctive patterns. In this sense, it shares similarities with Scotland’s tartan check, a traditional plaid pattern that represents family crests and cultural identity.

By sharing the cultural and historical background alongside the techniques and aesthetic appeal, I believe sashiko can reach and resonate with even more people.



## “Tsugaru Kogin-zashi”: A Craft Woven by Rural Women

As Morikawa explains, sashiko is a technique deeply rooted in Japan's living environment, inseparable from its historical and cultural background. Among its many forms, Tsugaru Kogin-zashi, a designated traditional craft of Aomori Prefecture, stands out as a remarkable fusion of wisdom and beauty born from harsh winters and strict clothing regulations.

To learn more about the history and charm of this unique craft, we spoke with Sachie Kubo, a curator at the Suntory Museum of Art, which holds a collection of 30 Tsugaru Kogin-zashi pieces, primarily from the Meiji period.

### — Could you tell us what exactly Tsugaru Kogin-zashi is?

**Kubo** Tsugaru Kogin-zashi is a technique that emerged and evolved in the Tsugaru region of Aomori Prefecture, crafted by rural women from the late Edo period onward.

It involves stitching white cotton thread onto hemp fabric dyed in deep indigo, navy blue, or Hanada-iro (a pale blue shade). What sets this technique apart is the unique method of picking up odd-numbered weft threads (horizontal threads) and stitching the cotton thread along the weft. This intricate technique is so precise that first-time viewers often mistake it for woven fabric created on a loom.

Although Tsugaru Kogin-zashi declined around 1887–1892, it was revived during the 1930s alongside the rise of the Mingei (folk craft) movement. Today, it is recognized as a designated traditional craft of Aomori Prefecture.



Higashi Kogin Kimono (Detail) One piece, Edo to Meiji period, 19th century / The distinctive geometric patterns of Tsugaru Kogin-zashi are created by combining fundamental motif units known as “Modoko”. By carefully picking up odd-numbered warp threads — each less than 1mm thick — and stitching white cotton thread along the weft, artisans painstakingly repeat this process row by row, resulting in intricate geometric patterns that resemble woven textiles.

## Kubo

Tsugaru Kogin-zashi can be categorized into three types based on the region where it was created and its pattern composition: Nishi Kogin, Higashi Kogin, and Mishima Kogin.

There are currently around 40 basic patterns, which artisans combine to create various intricate designs. Notable examples include “Tekona”, a butterfly motif, and “Uma no Kutsuwa” (horse bit), believed to ward off evil spirits and venomous snakes.



“Higashi Kogin Kimono” — One piece, Edo to Meiji period, 19th century / “Nishi Kogin Kimono” — One piece, Edo to Meiji period, 19th century / “Mishima Kogin Body Panel” — One piece, Edo to Meiji period, 19th century / Nishi Kogin features intricate patterns, notably a “horse bit” motif stitched on the back. Higashi Kogin tends to use coarser fabric, with bold and striking patterns. Meanwhile, Mishima Kogin is characterized by three distinctive vertical stripes adorning both the front and back.

### — What led to the development of this particular technique?

## Kubo

At the time, the Tsugaru domain imposed restrictions on the use of cotton for farmers. Since hemp fabric has poor insulation properties, it was not ideal for enduring the region’s harsh winters. As a solution, people began stitching cotton thread onto hemp fabric to enhance warmth and reinforce the material — this is how Tsugaru Kogin-zashi originated.

As for why the distinctive geometric patterns emerged, that remains unclear. However, Tsugaru Kogin-zashi has a strict rule: the stitches must follow an odd-numbered thread count. This precise adherence to the rule is undoubtedly what creates the craft’s remarkable beauty.



## “Did They Change Their Mind...?” — Traces of the Artisan’s Humanity Found in the Details

### — What do you find most captivating about Tsugaru Kogin-zashi?

## Kubo

Of course, the beauty of the designs and the remarkable techniques that

create them are impressive. But what fascinates me even more are the slight deviations from the expected patterns. For example, in the “Tekona” butterfly motif, some pieces feature variations — fewer stitches at the top or extended stitches at the bottom. In some cases, you can even spot moments where the artisan seemed to have changed their mind mid-stitch, switching to a different pattern altogether. These subtle changes reveal the individuality and humanity of the maker, which I find incredibly captivating.

Women who once practiced Tsugaru Kogin-zashi have shared their thoughts on this craft. Statements like, “Above all, creating beautiful kogin embroidery was our greatest wish, and I didn’t just stitch; I strived to create good patterns” (as recorded by Naomichi Yokoshima in *Tsugaru Kogin*) reflect how, amid harsh living conditions, stitching brought them a sense of joy and purpose.

When the Suntory Museum of Art held a Tsugaru Kogin-zashi exhibition in the past, it resonated particularly strongly with women in their 60s and 70s. Perhaps that’s because they could relate to the experience of finding comfort, clarity, and even salvation through the simple yet mindful act of working with their hands.



Higashi Kogin Body Panel (Full View & Detail) — One piece, Edo to Meiji period, 19th century / This example features the “Tomarazu” modoko pattern stitched across the entire fabric. Upon closer inspection, however, you can spot a small section where the “Uma no Kutsuwa” (horse bit) modoko has been added. “I can’t help but wonder,” says Kubo, “Did the artisan suddenly feel like trying a different pattern? Imagining these moments adds to the charm of exploring these pieces.”

## Kubo

We must also remember the mindset of the artisans — their dedication to preserving and cherishing these textiles through repeated repairs.

When sleeves or hems became frayed, they would cut them off and replace them with new fabric. Stained areas were redyed in indigo, and torn sections were reinforced with additional layers of stitching. In this way, the people of Tsugaru continuously found creative ways to care for and prolong the life of their Kogin-zashi pieces, treating them with great care and respect.



Double-stitched Higashi Kogin Body Panel (Full View & Detail) — One piece, Edo to Meiji period, 19th century / This “double-stitched kogin” features additional sashiko stitching layered over an already embroidered garment. This technique was employed to reinforce weakened or frayed areas, showcasing the maker’s resourcefulness. The sashiko work is so intricate that the original pattern is almost unrecognizable.

### **Kubo**

There’s a saying in the Aomori region: “Never throw away a piece of fabric if it’s big enough to wrap three adzuki beans.” This phrase reflects how precious fabric once was — no scrap, no matter how small, was to be wasted. Tsugaru Kogin-zashi emerged within this cultural context, and many pieces in our collection bear traces of careful preservation and prolonged use. July 2nd 2025, our museum will open an exhibition showcasing our Tsugaru Kogin-zashi collection in its entirety. I truly hope visitors will take the opportunity to see these remarkable pieces up close.

Valuing the old, caring for it, and passing it on to future generations—this cultural principle, long practiced in rural Japan, is now being embraced globally. As sashiko’s spirit of sustainable craftsmanship gains recognition overseas, it shapes a vision of a future built on circular values. Traditional handiwork that emerged from the rural villages of Japan is now taking on new meaning, guiding us toward a more sustainable society.



## Masahiko Morikawa

Based in London, UK, Morikawa specializes in sewing and pattern-making for clothing. He operates Studio Masachuka, where he provides sashiko-based clothing repairs and workshops. Additionally, he collaborates with UNIQLO EU through RE.UNIQLO STUDIO, offering garment repair services using traditional Japanese techniques, as well as training staff and creating upcycled products.



## Sachie Kubo

Curator at the Suntory Museum of Art. Completed doctoral course work in Art History at Waseda University's Graduate School of Letters, Arts and Sciences. She has curated exhibitions such as "190th Anniversary of Mokubei's Death" and "Art revisited, beauty revealed". Her area of expertise is the history of early modern Japanese painting.

Photos courtesy of Studio Masachuka, Fast Retailing, and Suntory Museum of Art.  
All images of Tsugaru Kogin-zashi works provided by Suntory Museum of Art.