

# Beauty of orient revealed in Japanese embroidery

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

tea with a Japanese master of the craft in his factory.

But Beatrice Keeber discovered that a common interest can bridge the cultural and communications gap.

When Exxon in Southfield sent her husband Willis to the country on a business trip, Mrs. Keeber took the opportunity to attempt to learn more about native embroidery techniques once used in the north of Japan to increase the warmth of farmers' and fishermen's workclothes.

The technique can be traced back to the 17th century when silk was too expensive to buy and only cotton thread was allowed to be imported into northern Japan. Hemp or the fiber from the mulberry tree was woven into cloth. The thin cloth was cool in the summer but useless for warmth in the winter.

The Japanese turned to a technique of patterned darning which is used in most ethnic embroidery and involves adding an overlay of woven design on the fabric.

Traditional designs were developed for the garments, combining decoration with the need for warmth.

**THE TECHNIQUE** was used for clothing early into the 20th century. Brides were expected to turn out three garments for themselves and three for their husbands. Girls began learning patterns when they were 5 years old. By the time they were 15, knew a variety of them from memory, Mrs. Keeber said.

It was these same techniques which drew Mrs. Keeber to Japan. Especially interested in taking classes and meeting persons skilled in the craft, Mrs. Keeber wanted to travel north, away from the tourists trails. She wrote for information to the Japanese consulate in Chicago but her letter was unanswered.

After speaking to a friend who had lived in Japan, she discovered that "everyone belongs to something." Usually people identify themselves with their place of work.

Taking the advice to heart, she sent a letter of introduction from Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village where she teaches along with her next letter to the consulate. For a sad measure, she had the letter sent through Exxon's office in Tokyo.

In a land where a work day begins with employees singing the company song, the method worked but the answer wasn't very encouraging.

Once she was north, she would be in effect a total illiterate. English wasn't spoken in the classes at all and she would put her teachers in the awkward position of seeking out an interpreter for her.

"That just isn't done," she said.

Her plan appeared to be on shaky ground, but Mrs. Keeber met the Japanese wife of an American banker living in Japan who was willing to travel with

her for the three days she wanted to spend in the northern Tsugaru district. They traveled to the 370-year-old town of Hirosaki, which has about 170,000 inhabitants. There they met Teizo Soma, a designer who used the traditional embroidery of the work clothes or kogin in a modern way. Elements of the design were isolated and used larger than they would be for clothing.

Soma's wife embroiders the half-aprons, called maekake, which were worn over the workaday kimono-shaped garments for special occasions. The maekake were embroidered in a traditional style known as hisha-zhishi.

Just as women have done for centuries, the women who worked in Soma's factory had the traditional patterns memorized. When he wanted a design incorporating an old pattern, he told them what he wanted. Soma doesn't need to work out a pattern on paper.

While visiting the factory, she was offered green tea which is given to all honored guests. When she visited the women in the upstairs workroom, they gestured to her to come over for some tea. Downstairs again, there was another cup of tea with Soma.

"By the time we got back into the taxi, I felt if he went fast, I'd slosh," she joked.

Soma showed her his collection of antique kogin embroidery, some of it 175 years old.

Some of the garments had been dyed twice, turning the blue of the fabric black and the white thread used in embroidery to indigo. The garment retained its two-color effect.

He also showed Mrs. Keeber some of his original designs, which he said he would never sell and would never be truly duplicated.

"Every time they do a pattern over again, little changes would be made," she said.

At the end of her visit, he gave her one of his designs, an indigo and white rectangular cloth filled with geometric patterns.

"It blew my mind. You give gifts to people when you visit," she said.

Another embroidery master she visited, Setsu Maeda, had a different style. She took the old motifs and turned them into wall hangings.

**SHE USED** the embroidery needle as a brush and depicted stylized scenes featuring nature subjects.

One of her works involved a peaceful mountain scene. It was her impression of Mount Iwaki, a volcano she saw outside her window.

But the peaceful mountain had an angry side and another depiction of the same spot was done with strong colors and angles.



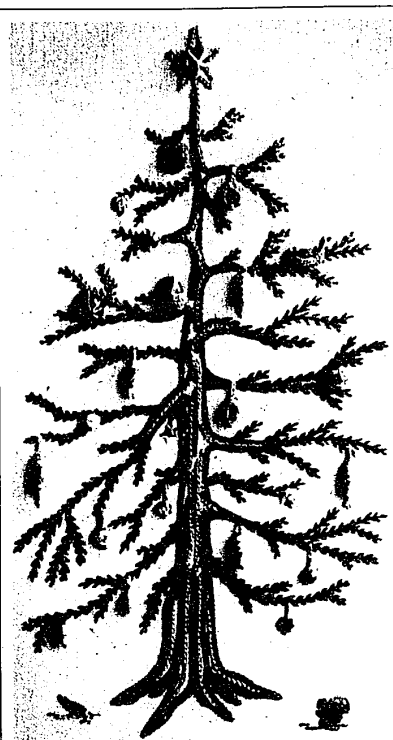
Beatrice Keeber sports an embroidered Japanese wedding gown.

"When I saw it, I shook my fist and then bent it against my chest to show anger. She understood me and nodded. It was the effect she wanted to show."

When she left, Mrs. Keeber was given a bag of apples from the artist's orchard. Her meetings with the two artisans

wasn't unusual for the kindness showed to her, Mrs. Keeber says.

"The kindness of the Japanese impressed me greatly. They went out of their way to be helpful and kind. But I was most impressed with their industriousness."



This embroidered Christmas tree was adapted from native Japanese embroidery techniques learned by Beatrice Keeber. (Staff photos by Randy Borst)

## INSIDE ANGLES

BY LOUISE OKRUTSKY

**YOU SAY YOU** drove to the Masonic Temple to buy a Christmas tree from the Jaycees and discovered they weren't there. You say your neighbors told you that no one but no one could miss a Christmas tree lot — but you did. Take heart. It's not your fault. It's not even Inside Angles' fault that you ended up in the wrong place. At the very last minute those fun-lovin' guys decided to put up their tree lot in front of the FAAC building on Middlebelt near 10 Mile in Farmington Hills. And they forgot to tell the rest of us. While we're discussing that fragile thing called memory, IA will refresh yours on the types of trees and prices at the Jaycees lot: The lot is open from 6:30-10:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and from noon to 10 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Trees are mostly scotch pines with a few blue-and-white spruces available. Prices range from \$9-\$12. For the truly picky tree buyer, there are more than 500 trees from which to choose.

**SANTA FELT** a little sorry for the town's realtors the other day when the prime lending rate jumped to 20 percent. Claus, a supporter of the underdog, jumped into a blue Chrysler Cordoba and delivered a series of melodious ho-ho-hos and candy canes to real-estate offices around town. Insiders say Claus has a secret helper, Margo Rosenthal, secretary for the State Farm Insurance office on Orchard Lake Road and 13 Mile. With pillowcases adding width to her 5-foot frame, she managed to do a more than passable imitation of the jolly old elf. But then, we understand that she's been known to impersonate Frankenstein's monster on Halloween. (Who says the insurance business is humorless?)

**TONIGHT** the Farmington City Council conducts two public hearings. One concerns the use of Community Development Funds; the other discusses the proposed acquisition of the Warner mansion by the city. The meeting begins at 8 p.m. in city hall on Liberty.

**EVIDENTLY FARMINGTON HILLS** resident Ken Kemp wasn't too thrilled about sampling life on the Mississippi, Farmington Hills style. Kemp, who lives on the corner of Colfax and Flower, awoke last Monday to discover that a downpour had turned his street into muddy waters. It wasn't the first time Kemp sang the blues over flooding in the area. Last summer his front yard was flooded after each rain prompting him to call the Hills DPW and engineering department and complain that the city had built up the road too high. The city hauled dirt to Kemp's property to use as fill to absorb the water. That solved the problem of the flooded front yard but then rainwater began to collect on Colfax.

Tired of river life, Kemp called the Observer to

find out if the city was planning on re-engineering that strip of road. Ralph Magid, public-service director in the Hills, said that the work was scheduled for next spring.

Evidently, the work schedule was bumped up because Kemp noticed city workers grading down the road Tuesday morning. A much nicer surprise than hoping Santa brings hip waders for Christmas.

**THE NORTH FARMINGTON** High School instrumental music department is under the direction of Douglas R. MacQueen presents its annual holiday concert at 8 p.m., Dec. 16 in the high school auditorium on 13 Mile east of Farmington Road. The symphony and concert bands and the orchestra and brass choir will perform seasonal music. A special feature of the concert will be the orchestra's performance of Concerto Grosso VIII by Arcangelo Corelli. Soloists for the concerto are violinist Kelly Garver, a senior; violinist Terri Baranowski, a junior; cellist Laura Hildebrand a senior and pianist Marguerite Tom, a junior. Admission for the concert is \$1.50 for adults, \$1 for students or \$4 for families. Children under 10 and senior citizens are welcome free of charge.

**LEAP INTO** Jerry's Book Store on Farmington Road just south of Grand River at 4 p.m., Dec. 20 with your copy of Lee Peel's history of Farmington. The town historian will put his signature in your copy. If you don't have a copy of the book, there are a few still available. (If you want to be really cute, ask him to sign his name backwards.)

**THE GENERAL** citizens' committee of the Farmington Youth Assistance meets at 7:30 p.m., Dec. 17 in the Farmington City Council chambers in the city hall on Liberty. The newly formed preschool council and ongoing parent-education classes will be discussed. The public is invited.

**SING IN THE** Christmas season with the Farmington library on Dec. 18 when the Liberty street branch sponsors a caroling party through the neighborhood. The schedule for that night is as follows: 6:15 p.m., assemble at the front door of the library (west side) where music sheets will be distributed and Bring a flashlight; 6:30 p.m., travel through the library's neighborhood singing your heart out; 7:30 p.m., come in from the cold for refreshments and films.

Because the auditorium, where the post-caroling festivities will take place, has limited space, reservations are necessary. Call the library at 474-7770 for reservations. Each family is requested to bring some of their favorite cookies (enough so each person gets three cookies). Cookies will be pooled and put out to sample.



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