

Monday, August 31, 1981

Kogin embroidery

East meets West for cultural exchange of ethnic arts

By Loraine McClish
staff writer

A delegation from Japan stopped in Farmington Hills recently for some sightseeing and a chance to exchange ethnic needlework arts.

The group was brought to the area by host Beatrice Keeber, a needle-crafter with a penchant for Kogin embroidery.

Mrs. Keeber's guest of honor was Selsu Maeda, one of only 80 persons in her country who have been designated

a "Living National Treasure of Japan." She was accompanied by her husband, son-in-law, and 15 of her students working to perpetuate the art of Kogin embroidery.

Mrs. Maeda's designation is given by the Japanese government to those few folk artists-craftsmen whose skills and knowledge are recognized as intangible cultural properties.

Being a National Living Treasure carries responsibility as well as prestige. Mrs. Maeda now bears the burden of assuring her government that the folk art in which she is so adept does not die with her.

She carries out this duty traveling, giving workshops and classes, displaying her art and lecturing on the history of the rural area where Kogin embroidery had its beginnings.

THROUGH AN involved, circuitous, complex and sometimes frustrating route, Mrs. Keeber found her way to Japan's Tsugaru Peninsula to learn more about the Kogin crafters when she visited that country less than a year ago.

Guides and interpreters were necessary to make her way to the village, far off the beaten tourist path, to find to small cottage industry that employs 200 women creating the embroidery.

Ultimately, "it was a friend of a friend of a friend," a newspaper columnist who writes for an English-written newspaper in Japan, who mapped out her trek, she said. The columnist also furnished the necessary introduction to both Teizo Sohma, a designer of Kogin and overseer of the cottage industry, as well as Mrs. Maeda.

"Everything is done by hand there," Mrs. Keeber said. "The material is woven on hand looms, then dyed by hand before the embroidery of counted stitches is even begun."

She was privileged to view an antique collection of Kogin and was given a gift of the work by Sohma. "That was a supreme honor," her interpreter told her.

As she prepared to leave her hosts she said, "Be sure to visit if you are ever in Michigan."

MRS. KEEBER was offered one bus and she forgets how many cars to be used as transportation when she learned she would be host to the 18-member group of tourists.

Betty Paine, director of Farmington Community Center, offered the center without charge for more than a 100 embroiders who furnished an American pot-luck supper in return for meeting a "Living National Treasure" and her students.

The "Kogin Goodwill Tour" was greeted by Detroit Institute of the Arts docents and Greenfield Village teach-

ers who were introduced to Kogin. The contingent were dinner guests of Mr. and Mrs. James Ellis; she is president of Farmington Area Commission for the Arts. Through it all, Mrs. Maeda showed the traditional white threaded geometrical designs created by counting threads on the woven rich blue material, together with other later-day variations.

"The embroidery stemmed from a need for warmth," Mrs. Keeber said. "Those working the land of the feudal lords used what they had to make their own clothing. Adding the extra threads onto the linen they had simply provided another layer of warmth for them."

The additional layer of warmth ultimately turned into a distinctive design, intrinsic to those who worked for a specific land baron.

KOGIN EMBROIDERY is used in Japan exclusively as an art work. One design may cover a place mat, or a doily, or be placed on a handbag, or used as a wall hanging.

"I never saw any of it used to decorate clothing," Mrs. Keeber said, who is going to do just that.

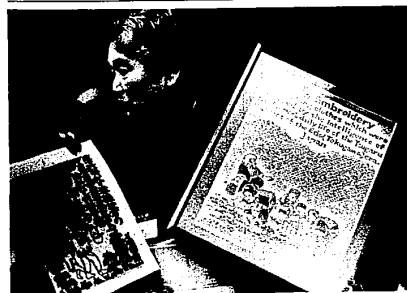
She has used the basic techniques of Kogin to fashion designs on a few shirts and tops, and said she will expand on that, "because that is what cultural exchange is all about."

'Everything is done by hand there. The material is woven on hand looms, then dyed by hand before the embroidery is even begun.'

— Beatrice Keeber



Setsu Maeda, designated as a "Living National Treasure of Japan," assures her government of the perpetuation of Kogin embroidery as she travels teaching and lecturing on the art.



The woodcuts depicting the beginnings of Kogin embroidery were a gift from Setsu Maeda to Farmington Hills. Councilman Jack Burwell accepted the gift on behalf of the city.



White on blue are the traditional colors used in Kogin embroidery with a multitude of variations on the geometric design. Beatrice Keeber, at left, who served as hostess for the tour during their stay here,

doubled as a model to show some of the samples of Kogin in the display. At right is Mrs. Maeda's son-in-law K. Hamada, who acted as interpreter.

Staff photos by Randy Borst



Farmington Community Center grounds spilled over with guests, most of them needlecrafters, to see the display of Kogin embroidery and hear Mrs. Maeda tell of the ancient art. The center was offered free of

charge for use by the Kogin Goodwill Tour. Detroit Baptist Manor furnished a bus for the group's transportation during their two-day stay in the Detroit area.

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