

Re-igniting the Flames of Intercultural Design Exchange: My Journey through Japan to Bring Back Traditional Textile Practices

In 2007, I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota in Design Housing and Apparel. During my time at “the U,” I participated in a wonderful intercultural design exchange program led by Marilyn Delong at UMN and UMN Graduate and professor at Hong-ik University in Seoul, South Korea. Our program included design projects paired with our South Korea Partners, a museum exhibit at UMN, and a research symposium in Seoul. Each student group visited the others’ campus and city for a week-long tour. Through this exchange, we broadened our understanding of design through the eyes of another culture. This experience at UMN lit the spark of inspiration for me to engage with apparel design through a cross-cultural lens.



Figure 1 Ellen in Japan

Today, I am an Associate Professor at Iowa State University of Science and Technology. My field of study is fashion design, where I study cross-cultural influences in design and functional and creative design. As a Fulbright scholar, I got the opportunity to visit Japan and explore my passion for apparel design in depth. From the spark ignited at

UMN, I have been interested in understanding the impact of culture on my field of clothing and textiles. Fulbright is a great match for this passion because it allows building relationships with someone in another country interested in the same things you are interested in.

Textiles in Japan have been historically and culturally very significant. The detail is perfect. Every step is thought through. Despite this, the traditional textile-making practices are slowly dying out. This is threatening the cultural heritage and the livelihoods of the people involved in these practices. Designers have started adopting these textiles in modern apparel to save this dying art. This is what piqued my interest. I wanted to understand and spread this innovative idea to see if it could be implemented worldwide to save other traditional practices from dying out. My Bunka Gakuen University research partner, Professor Yuko Watanabe, and I interviewed designers from [Arlnata](#), [YAMMA](#), [Ay](#), [Mint Designs](#), and [Ruri W.](#)

When I got the opportunity to conduct my research at Bunka Gakuen University, the top institute in Japan for apparel design, I was elated. I recall the advanced technology and high-quality facilities of the university. It was wonderful to be there and experience this renowned place and see how they educate their students and prepare them for the industry.

Through Bunka, I toured the [Bunka Research Lab for Fashion Textiles](#)—a collaboration between a textile factory adopted by the university and academia. This mutually beneficial partnership amazed me. The periodic university events also excited the



Figure 2 Bunka Research Lab for Fashion Textiles

passionate designer in me. I had an opportunity to attend a talk where the speaker was a person who worked very closely with Yohji Yamamoto. It was amazing to hear about his career path and design philosophy.



Figure 3 Ainu robe

My work also took me to [Bashofu](#) textile makers and [Ryukyu Kasuri weavers](#) in Okinawa. I also recall with excitement how I got the opportunity to walk through the entire hand-making process of Bingata textile at [Shiroma](#) in Okinawa. I think that's a unique experience that I would never have an opportunity to do otherwise. In Kyoto, I learned [Tsuji-gahana](#) dyeing techniques. In Hokkaido, I learned about the Ainu culture, traditional textile practices, and ways to revive it. I fondly remember the willingness of Japanese artisans to share their crafts.

Now that I am back in the U.S., I plan to analyze the data collected with professor Watanabe and publish articles to share my findings. I have also incorporated my learning into my teaching. The first project we did was looking at Ainu culture and how that can be communicated in the garment. Projects on the techniques I learned in Kyoto and the reuse of kimonos were also completed. There are a lot of kimonos in Japan that nobody wants anymore. I have a research area in sustainability and zero waste. So that's another aspect I am looking at. I also am interested in future possibilities in collaboration with Bunka.



Figure 4 Okinawan Bingata

Being in Japan for the Fulbright experience was one of the best experiences. It was especially a joy to connect with the Japan Minnesota Association through their online holiday party. It was fascinating to hear about Minnesota's bid for Minnesota USA Expo 2027. It was also delightful to be introduced to each member online and hear about their connections to and love for "the U." While we may have been there at different times, we are all united by our experience. I am especially grateful to Japan Minnesota Association President Harumi Iwanami, who welcomed me to the group and even helped with my research by sharing her own experiences with kimono. It has been a pleasure to keep up with the group's activities through Harumi's messages and photos now that I am back in the US. I'm so grateful to "the U" for igniting my passion for intercultural exchange and past, present, and future connections.



Figure 5 Learning Tsuji-gahana in Kyoto