

## In the Spirit of Otsuzure

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In Northern Japan until just after World War II, “clothing was just as valuable as money” due to a history of extreme sumptuary laws and poverty (Koide & Tsuzuki, 2009, p. 35). Heavily tattered and mended boro garments characterize the extreme methods of frugality employed to sustain garments over lifetimes. Indigenous Japanese otsuzure, workwear (Kawasaki, Gallery Kei, Szczepanek, Portland Japanese Garden & Durston, 2011, p. 15), were examined for clues to efficient material usage, aesthetics of wear, and methods of reuse, reinforcement, and repair that may be applied to the design and making of sustainable contemporary apparel.

These extant boro garments included an early- to mid-century sodenashi (sleeveless vest) and mompe (pants) from the designer’s private collection—and led to the design of a two-piece look. Well worn fabric scraps over- and under-lay the already shabby fabric plies; and these are reinforced by parallel rows of sashiko running stitches to repair, strengthen, and add warmth to worn areas (Kawasaki et al., 2011). The sodenashi is especially worn, as evidenced by the many layers, disintegrating bindings, and fading dyes. Because the mompe show less wear, fewer layers were added to reinforce the legs. To preserve the parallel stitching pattern on the exterior, the sashiko stitches continue across only one fabric layer. The vest uses rectangular pattern parts, while the pants incorporate rectangular and mostly triangular shapes. Both close with self-ties. Similar to couture garments, the interior construction is visible, while the exteriors are quilted evenly with sashiko stitches and the edges are bound.

Principles of wabi-sabi describe the essence of an unpretentious Japanese aesthetic based upon the imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete (Koren, 1994). Aesthetic principles of wabi-sabi influencing the design, included simplicity of forms and closure (wrapping and tying), angular structures, hard-to-describe colors and wiry, variegated materials that transform (age) over time. Materials were on-hand and evoke the research in their fiber content, texture, hue, and hand. Although this design focuses on economy in materials, incorporating wabi-sabi aesthetics melds both. The overall goal was to develop a two-piece look incorporating aspects of the aesthetic, including: a) a no-waste top/vest from one piece of fabric and b) pants with angularly shaped pieces that improve material utilization.

No materials were purchased; fabrics used were on hand and slightly damaged, e.g., minor holes. They evoke the research in their fiber content, texture, hues, and hand. They are fabricated from materials that reflect the bast and paper fibers used before cotton became available to the working class. Fabrications include, a translucent navy/grey yarndye with a twisted 1/8” cellulose weft that reflects shi-fu paper yarns and variegated grey/brown hair canvas for the pants. Shared materials include sample cuts of cotton twill tape, fallout from past projects (e.g., unevenly dyed silk organza), and sashiko threads.

The top was developed via a series of heuristic draping sessions until the process stalled. Pausing to draft the mompe led, inadvertently, to a solution for shaping excess fabric into a collar, making the one-piece, zero-waste pattern possible. The single piece sleeveless, flared top features a cut-in-one collar, angular hemline, and tie closure. Asymmetrically balanced sashiko quilting was placed relative to fabric damage and areas of wear, using a secondary layer from the unevenly dyed silk organza to retain translucency. The minimalistic form of the top is uncontrived; a natural reflection of a solitary rectangle cut to eliminate all waste while balancing perfectly from the shoulders.

The mompe was drafted and the pattern modified to fit within the narrow fabric dimensions. Mompe side seams are traditionally open below the waist on the sides. Wrapping two sets of waist ties about the waist forms the closure. Kimono fabric is revealed through the slashes. For modesty an unusual pocket was devised that retains the adjustable tie closure at the waist while also eliminating gaping at the sides. The modified pattern cut also led to improved material efficiency and fit. The cropped pants feature a rectangular front leg panel that overlaps the back leg at an angle, front and back crotch gussets, the hidden pockets, and tie closures.

The garments integrate clean structures with adaptable fit. Sashiko stitches reinforce fragile areas. Thus the sustainable features become integral to the designs. A blend of hand and machine technologies integrates function and craft into wearable garments that transcend fast fashion trends—and contribute alternative methods to patternmaking and pocket design.

“In the Spirit of Otsuzure” focuses on economy through wabi-sabi aesthetics, as well as a reduction in materials and assembly operations. Some outcomes:

- Economy of form and line produce timeless styling; rustic hues and textures contribute a wabi-sabi wearing experience
- Although the vest is zero-waste it is not austere in design. The pants are minimal waste. Future testing of gussets relative to fit and fabric utilization may improve economy and enhance fit.
- Reduced materials usage: no hardware; simple closures; no interfacing.
- Reduced number of assembly operations due to simplicity of structure and closures
- Sashiko quilting reinforces and camouflages damaged areas while also integrating fabric fallout from earlier projects.
- Surface design is traditional hand quilting in sashiko style, however machine quilting could be substituted
- The pocket design resulted from using previously rejected, poorly dyed fabric
- The vest was draped using minimal cutting, thus supporting the fifth design practice for zero waste recommended by Carrico & Kim (2014).

## References

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