

Matsuyo Hayashi

Katazome Instructor and Master Bingata Dyer



Matsuyo Hayashi, 1973

I was fortunate to have had a wonderful teacher, Madam Matsuyo Hayashi, a master of bingata dyeing. Japanese masters of traditional techniques rarely took on foreigners. At seventeen, fresh off the boat, why me?

Matsuyo Hayashi spent the majority of her life married to a very famous illustrator of folk costumes, but it was an unhappy marriage and quite frankly she was a very mean and bitter person as a result. When I met her, her husband was dead from natural causes, one son dead from suicide, and her only daughter had run off to join a Catholic convent in Brazil. After contracting breast cancer for the second time, resulting in two radical mastectomies, she simply gave up. She gave up on self-pity, on bitterness, and on disappointment.

As a first step toward changing her life, she dismissed all of her students and began a search for a protégé radically different from any she had endured. Just at that point I was presented to her by Kunio Ekiguchi as an applicant for training. I didn't know anything of her life up to that point, of course, but it seems I was about as different an apprentice as there was to be found. She had never had anyone so young, male, or foreign. My lucky day!

My interview with her consisted of examining a set of erotic illustrations that her husband had spent years meticulously reproducing from block prints (*shunga*) with his skill as a traditional painter. Here I was, a seventeen-year-old boy, raised in a devout Catholic household, sitting sipping green tea on an already hot summer day, while examining acrobatic feats I had never before contemplated. All the while we discussed the patterns, dyes, and weaving techniques, as well as the range of garments worn (or *not*) by the impassioned participants in the highly detailed illustrations. In hindsight, so to speak, I imagine it was a test of my ability to focus.

Madam Hayashi could not have been kinder to me. I didn't realize I wasn't supposed to ask questions during instruction. She was a traditional teacher in a traditional medium, and my role as student was to shut up and observe. It was a hard lesson learned.

Her former students (my "upperclassmen" – *senpai*) who appeared from time to time to check up on her (or me) often cuffed my ears for being so brazen in my inquiries. She, however, never showed shock or annoyance, and always answered my questions to the best of her ability. She went out of her way to teach me things she had never taught the other students – if only because she assumed I wouldn't have access to supplies once I returned home, and therefore felt it crucial that I have a thorough working knowledge of how to make and prepare everything from scratch. This got me



*Bingata kimono (karinui), natural dyes on silk tsumugi
Matsuyo Hayashi, 1968
Collection of John Marshall*

another lop upside my head from some of my *senpai*—well, just because.

As I came to learn more of her past, I grew to greatly admire her ability to lose herself in her art form. For even though she had elected to change her life, those around her were still as they had always been and treated her as they had always done.

She died five years into my studies.

As the end drew near, there was so much she still wanted me to learn. So much so, that she took me in tow to several other teachers to ask that they accept me as an apprentice once she was gone. As I observed the *nusumi nozoki* (learn through stealing a glance) method of instruction employed by these masters, I felt so fortunate to have been blessed with Hayashi Sensei as my active teacher and mentor. It was only years later that I realized how much she had to humble herself to beseech her peers on my behalf, only to be indifferently rebuffed by them. Masters don't share students, they don't share knowledge with other masters' students.

I have set my heart to share this love of hers with others, through my own artwork as well as through sharing what little knowledge I have gleaned of traditional textiles, as my only way of hoping to repay even a small portion of what she bequeathed to me.



Wading along the shore, Taketomijima, 1975

I took this photo of Mdm. Hayashi on one of our field trips to Okinawa. She always seemed so lost. Her only real joy was when she was immersed in her art work.