

A Trip to Japan

Hillu Liebelt, London Guild



Left: Hillu Liebelt teaching at Seian University.

Below: Shindigo ball
All photos from the author



In October 2006 I visited Japan for the first time; a trip made possible by a generous grant from the Theo Moorman Trust.

I had been invited to teach a class in tapestry weaving at the Seian University of Art and Design near Kyoto and give another three-day workshop at the Kawashima Textile School. The school is linked to *Kawashima Textile Industry*, a large company which produces anything from bedlinen and fabric for interiors to the covers for car and aeroplane seats. Most interesting for me, however, was an enormous tapestry loom (over ten metres wide) in a large hall, on which eight weavers were working side by side and,

better still, to be able to watch the men in an adjacent room weaving *obi* (sashes for kimono) on traditional Japanese looms. With fifty ends per inch it was the finest tapestry weave I had ever seen. Indeed the cloth is so fine that the weavers file tiny grooves into their fingernails and use them as a kind of comb in order to beat the silk weft into place.

My main reason, however, for wanting to go to Japan was to meet a number of well-known textile artists whose work I had seen and admired, not only in the two major exhibitions here in Britain, *Textural Space* (2001) and *through the surface* (2004), but also in the exhibition on Japanese textiles in Tournai, Belgium

(2005). They included Machiko Agano, Naomi Kobayashi, Asako Ishizaki, Michiko Kawarabayashi, the tapestry weaver Yasuko Fujino and Jun Tomita, whom I had met in London a year earlier (and who may be known to a number of weavers and dyers in Britain from the 70s, when he studied in Farnham and taught a number of workshops. He is also the author of *Japanese Ikat Techniques*). As it turned out they all knew each other and I was effortlessly handed over from one artist to the next. Jun Tomita arranged a special visit to his friend Hiroyuki Shindo, the indigo dyer, whose *Shindigo Balls* are known all over the world. They were all most generous with their time, invited me



Above: Obi weaver on a traditional Japanese loom, Nishijin Textile Centre, Kyoto.



Right: Close-up of the weaver at work.

Below: the weaving and shuttles.



into their homes or studios, and we spent long hours together discussing our work, exchanging thoughts and talking about differences in concept and approach to our work.

The time in Japan was very intense and I loved to stroll around the markets and through the temple gardens of Kyoto, visiting galleries and the Nishijin area, renowned for its rich textile history. Everything was so different and new that it sometimes felt as if all my senses were under attack. But it was made much easier by the lovely people who in their generous way helped out wherever they could. Hospitality is still taken very seriously in Japan and the artists I met went out of their way to make me feel at ease.

I returned home in early November, enriched in many ways, full of new impressions and thoughts and the happy feeling of having found a number of new friends.

Moreover, I came back with a rich harvest: one of my pieces was to be shown

in a group exhibition at the famous *Gallery Gallery* in Kyoto in December and the organisers of the *Knitting and Stitching Show* have offered a stand for my new work to be exhibited this autumn in Birmingham (NEC, 13-16 September), London (Alexandra Palace, 11-14 October) and Harrogate (International Exhibition Halls, 22-25 November), where I will be able to show the results of my 'experimental phase'. It will include sketches, photographs, models and some finished pieces.

In addition I have found a Japanese partner for my exhibition at the *Grace Barrand Design Centre* in Nutfield, Surrey (9 September - 20 October 2007). Asako Ishizaki was one of the artists in the exhibition *Textural Space* (touring Britain and Japan) and her work was featured in a number of magazines, among them on the front pages of *The Journal* (June 2001) and *Embroidery*. And, last but not least, I received an invitation for a solo show and an offer for an artist's residency in 2008 in a large gallery in Katsuyama/Okayama Prefecture.



Top: Asako Ishizaki in her studio.

Left: Hiroyuki Shindo's village.