

Ainu Crafts – Patterns with a Prayer

April. 2nd (Tue) – June. 2nd (Sun), 2013

There remains traces of Ainu people around 17th to 18th century from all area of present Hokkaido, the Kuril Islands, the south Karahuto, to Tsugaru and Shimokita Peninsula which is located in the northern part of Main island of Japan, Honshu.

Ainu people who had led their lives by hunting and fishing in harmony with nature believed that the nature itself was God, or *kamuy* in their language, like animals, plants, mountains, rivers, fires, thunder and so on. They believed that there existed souls in everything in heaven and on earth, even in materials produced by human beings.

Ainu people applied very powerful and very unique patterns to daily objects such as clothes and wooden works. They have thought that those Ainu patterns would have magical significances and protect themselves from evil. They have been producing many folk patterns with high degree of complication in their long history. Among them are a spiral pattern called *moreu* and a brackets-like pattern called *aiushi*, which means having thorns. *Moreu* attached to backs of clothes protect people, playing a role as evil eyes. *Aiushi*, on the other hand, embroidered in backs, sleeves and hems exorcizes evil spirits. Each pattern conveys a prayer for safety and peace of those who wear the clothes.

There are two types in the existing clothes made by Ainu women. One is those woven of elm bark fiber and nettles. The other is those made with old clothes obtained through trade and other activities from the main land of Japan, Honshu.

'*Attus*' appliquéd with black or indigo cotton cloths imported from Honshu on heavy and thin fabric ground made from elm bark fiber, '*Tetarape*' appliquéd on white fabric ground made of nettles, '*Ruunpe*' appliquéd with tape-shaped thin cotton and silk cloths on cotton fabric ground, '*Kaparamip*' appliquéd with cut-worked cloths of wide cotton on cotton fabric ground. These are representative clothes. Especially, the *ruunpe* of red muslin is very rare and precious which could not be seen elsewhere in the world.

On the other hand, men produced living tools and wooden tableware. They carved Ainu patterns in various things around

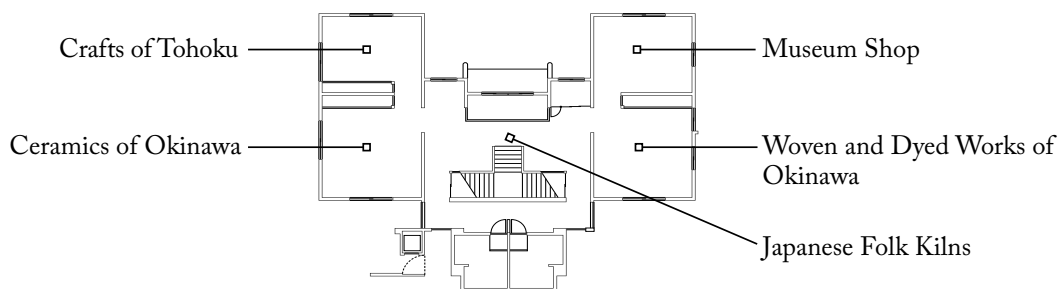
them. For example, knives called *makiri* used for cutting and dividing animals or cutting cloths for applique, cigarette cases, and libation sticks called *iku pasuy* used in the ceremony praying for God.

Soetsu Yanagi, founder of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum, admired the culture of Ainu people as well as the culture of the Korean peninsula and Okinawa. At that time, Ainu people were thought to be uncivilized. However, it is known that Yanagi introduced the aesthetic beauty of crafts made by Ainu people.

Yanagi, with a support from Sueo Sugiyama who was a collector and researcher of Ainu crafts, held the exhibition of Ainu crafts and culture in September, 1941. It was five years since the Japan Folk Crafts Museum was founded. This was the first exhibition of Ainu crafts in a museum ever and Yanagi planned this exhibition because he appraised Ainu crafts from the view point of their figurative values and aesthetic beauty. It was a very large exhibition; rooms on the first floor including a main hall were used to display as many as 600 items and more such as dyed and woven materials, various wood works and necklaces. Yanagi published an article titled 'Eyes to Ainu' in the Kogei magazine volume 106. There he said, 'They are not just beautiful. They are respectable and even mysterious. Their power of creation seems extraordinary.' It was Keisuke Serizawa, dyer, who selected the exhibits of this exhibition with deep confidence from Yanagi.

Now the number of Ainu crafts and materials in the Japan Folk Crafts Museum is, with a collection of mainly Ainu glass beads donated by Taiichi Kobayashi, about 1000 items such as dyed and woven materials, wood works and accessories. In this occasion, about 100 works from the collection as well as 16 works from the Shizuoka City Serizawa Keisuke Art Museum are on display. Each work was used in the daily life of Ainu people, which is deeply connected with their spiritual beliefs that God exist in every object and phenomenon around us. It would be an honor if visitors appreciate the world of Ainu Crafts.

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