Report from Japan: Art, Education, and Community

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Abstract

This is a field report of a three-week experience in Japan, centered on art education in their cultural and social contexts. Beginning with this overarching focus, the themes and patterns that structure this report were emergent, rising from the experience. Those supporting themes are: being in Japan and in Mino city (setting a context); the culture of handmade Washi paper; the qualities of the Washi paper festival; craft as a way of teaching, being and learning; children and their art at school and through the festival, and the importance of ritual. This report is written in a personal narrative style as suggested in contemporary feminist and transactive ethnographic literature.

Key Words: cross-cultural art education, feminist, transactive ethnography, Japanese art education
Research Premises and Strategies

This is a narrative report of a three-week experience in Japan, centered on art and education in their social contexts. The point of this investigation is to understand something of art and education in Japan in their authentic social contexts, and by comparison, to understand something more of my own theory and practice as an American art educator. I hope to shed light, in some small way, on this particular experience, with implications beyond the experience itself (Eisner, 1998), especially through comparison of Japanese and American art education as they are embedded in their cultures. The insights in this report come from a socially reconstructivist, traditionally left of center point of view, but within these basic propensities, I had no prefigured foci (Eisner, 1998). So in collecting and processing data, I attempted to remain experientially open to what developed thematically, in an organic manner.

Methodologically, I utilize feminist ethnographic strategy for both examination and reporting (Tedlock, 2000). That is, I take as a starting point that one of the primary ways human beings understand the world and our place in it is to tell our human stories in their authentic contexts (Goodall, 2000; Seidman, 1998; Tedlock, 2000). I also take the position that observation and reporting by the researcher are transactional in nature (Eisner, 1998), that in observing and reporting I am neither omnisciently objective nor consumed by impressionist subjectivity. My understanding rises from the interaction of the objective world and what I bring to it: what my brain and heart make of the sensations brought to me by my eyes, ears, skin, and kinesthetic senses. I necessarily see, understand, and report this through my American eyes, with my American heart, brain, and sensibility.

As with some previous work (Anderson & Fulkova, 2005), this transactional report reflects a feminist philosophical stance called observation of participation (Tedlock, 2000). In the observation of participation model, fieldwork and the way it is reported turn away from centering themselves in participant observation, in which the observer stands off as a sort of professional outsider (Agar, 1980), moving instead toward the model of observation of participation, through which
“ethnographers both experience and observe their own and others’ coparticipation within the ethnographic scene of encounter” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 464). In participant observation, the researcher is somehow supposed to be able to be simultaneously both scientifically objective and personally involved: to somehow avoid the bias and prejudice of the native view while also being engaged enough to be able to reflect it empathetically (Hammersly and Adkinson, 1983). Tedlock, (2000) argued that such a stand is hierarchical from a Western perspective and representative of a male-oriented objectified construction of social understandings. She suggested that a “more honest and egalitarian approach is to present both self and other together within a single narrative frame that focuses on the process and character of the ethnographic dialogue” (pp. 464-465). In this paradigm, engaging with others in their indigenous contexts requires the field worker also to reveal her/himself through personalized narrative (Goodall, 2000). This auto-ethnography democratizes knowledge and fosters a critical awareness that the inquirer’s class, race, beliefs be placed for observation on the same critical plane as those of the subjects of inquiry. Tedlock (2000) describes this observation of participation as a strategy that fosters cooperative equal exchange between co-participants who have similar interests and goals, forming a type of border-zone cultural production, in which both self and other are represented within a single text.

My narrative, then, is an “interactive self-other conversation or dialogue” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 461) woven together in the form of a chronicle or travelogue, again reflecting feminist principles, combining description, dialogue, qualities of conversation, and inner reflection, as they arise naturally in the narrative. A wide range of ethnographically inclined writers, including Claude Levi-Strauss, Zora Neale Hurston (Tedlock, 2000), and Studs Terkel (1974), and this author (Anderson 2000a; Anderson & Fulkova, 2005) have effectively used this format.

Practically, I took frequent digital photographs, totaling several thousand over the three week period, accompanied by hand-written entries in a journal, in which I described and reflected on the nature my experience, facilitated by the photographic record. If I was unable to take notes immediately after taking pictures, I wrote entries at least daily, often hourly, in which I would
describe, analyze, and evaluate the nature of my experience, constructing thematically emergent foci (Anderson, 2000b; Eisner, 1998; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) as patterns of experience presented themselves. Second level phenomenological insights as to the meaning of the experience arose from my continuing reflection on the notes and photos, directed by my proclivities and sensitivities as they framed my emergent intentionality. Following is my report.

Being in Japan

The first thing that breaks through into my consciousness every morning is the pair of ravens who live in the neighborhood. They talk to each other from the pine grove that borders the bamboo thicket where I’m staying. The frogs in the courtyard garden have croaked all night, every night, but since the first night they’ve became background, like the cicadas, and I don’t hear them, unless I make a point of it. Mrs. Takahashi, Atsuko, says the frogs rare. I guess so; I haven’t seen one. Some mornings, when the ravens are lax with their dawn ritual I don’t hear anything until I hear the drum beat, pierced by an occasional gong against a background of droning and chanting rising and falling in the distance.

My host, Takahashi Joshin, is a Zen monk. I’m a guest of his temple. Every day, Mrs. Takahashi brings me breakfast on a lacquered tray, leaving it on a small low table in outer room of my shoji screened, tatami-matted suite. Breakfast is never the same, one day to the next, but a typical meal might be a piece of broiled salmon, a bowl of sticky rice with a light topping of ginger or a touch of something salty, some very small, crispy, salty fish, some salty pickled plant stems with the texture of green beans, some pickled mushrooms, and a cup of hot or
cold green tea, all served in small helpings on separate, delicate, intentionally non-matched dishes, each elegant in its own way.

After breakfast, I move down the hall between the temple and the Takahashi house to the front door. I have to duck for each of the four door jams along the passage. I've miscalculated a few times, but only once seriously enough to warrant broken skin and bruising. Shin Murase came to pick me up that day to take me to the Mino City Cultural Hall. When he noticed my disfigured head, he said “Sumimasen (I’m sorry); Our houses built for Japanese stature.” “No problem,” I said, as I moved around the front door on the right side of his Toyota Carina station wagon. He moved quickly to let me in on the left, of course, because in Japan the driver’s side is on the right. They drive on the left. As my friend Abe Toshifumi said, “You drive on the right side in America. We drive on the correct side, here.”

Mino City: A Washi Town

I’m in Mino City, Japan, to give a children’s art workshop and to keynote an art criticism conference. Located in Gifu Province, on the island of Honshu, inland and north of Nagoya, Mino is a small city—a town really—of about 27,000, sitting on the banks of a picturesque fishing stream. The picture of Mino most frequent in the tourist literature is the bridge over this rocky stream. Fishermen in Chinese style straw hats line the banks and wade into the stream with very long bamboo poles to catch a small cold-water fish called Anu. But maybe more than for fishing, Mino, historically, is famous for being a papermaking town, and it’s pinning its future to that past. The downtown main street has been restored except for the asphalt and traffic signs, to its look of a hundred years ago. It’s full of paper shops, a paper museum, crafts shops, traditional coffee shops and restaurants, and small galleries. Even the hardware store and the cellular phone company have traditional facades. Mino has made itself into a destination primarily for Japanese tourists, who want to experience traditional culture, the ancient culture of paper.
For centuries, the making of handmade paper called Washi, was the backbone of Mino’s economy. Not too long ago, artisans made Washi in more than a hundred family workshops. Today, there are maybe 30 individual paper makers and the numbers are declining. Most so-called Washi now is being made in factories. But one can still see it being made by hand at the Mino Washi Museum and a few other workshops in the area. I watched a craftsman at the Museum dip a huge framed screen into a sluice box of liquid paper pulp, pull it up and shift it around and around and back and forth like a miner panning for gold, until the water was gone and all that was left was a thin piece of paper. He looked at it carefully and apparently decided it was too thin and repeated the process a couple times more. Then he simply peeled it up, set it aside to dry, and started sluicing his frame for the next sheet. As with all highly skilled craftspeople, he made the whole thing look almost effortless.

The Makings of a Festival

To foster the culture of Washi, and to celebrate 50 years of township status, the city government, with support from the central government, organized an international conference of arts and crafts for children, centered on Mino’s fine, handmade papers. There’s an ancient Japanese saying that the standing up nail gets hammered down, and any Japanese is quick to declare that no one stands above the group, but the man most centrally responsible for this celebration of all things paper was Murase Shin. In Japan, it is the group—being in it and of it—that makes all things possible (DeMente, 1993), and Murase is quick to deflect credit for the celebration to others. Key members of the group include Tasuhide Tsuji, an art education professor at Gifu University, the mayor and members of city government, and a plethora of others: translators, professors, speakers, support staff, local craftspeople, parents and children, school principals and teachers and staff, and hosts such as the Takahashis, among them. The connectivity of
Japanese culture is intricate, complex, all pervasive, obligatory, reciprocal, willingly engaged, and powerful in its ability to get big and little things done.

But my Western eyes saw Murase San as the leader. The Director of the Mino Cultural Center, Murase is as understated as his old Toyota station wagon, as unstoppable as the Eveready Bunny, and an immensely respected figure in the cultural life of Mino City. The more I saw, the more it seemed to me that he was central to conceiving, inspiring, and organizing the entire event. In his late fifties, with a shock of gray hair, a ready and open smile, and the energy of a 25-year-old, he has a baby on the way. He’s a quiet, unassuming man who has an air of perpetual amusement. I get the sense there is considerable depth of understanding behind that constant slight smile. He’s comfortable in the world in a way that most of us aren’t. A man of modest physical dimensions, he gets bigger and bigger the longer I’m around him. Not only the director of the Mino City Cultural Center, Murase is also the former director and founder of the regional Washi Museum, located just outside of town. One day, he and Mr. Tasuhide took me to the museum.

In the Washi Museum

The Washi Museum, like other cultural venues I’ve seen in Japan, is complex that would be perfectly respectable in any major American city. In a town the size of Mino, the sheer scope and presence of the Washi Museum seem to belie the possible resources that could be drawn upon to support it, at least by American standards. But it follows from the Japanese collectivist tendency (DeMente, 1993) that there is an extraordinary amount of money and energy directed toward the public good, including, it appears, the arts and the culture of the arts. Thinking of other well-funded museums in Japan, and on seeing this one, I said to my translator, Tabata Yoko “In America, it seems we don’t have the same level of support for the arts, as you do.” She replied, “Maybe because we are an old country and have had more time to come to value them.” There may be something to that, I thought.

Upon entering the museum, I meet the current director, and we have a nice chat. I ask him if I can take some pictures. He seems a little flustered momentarily, disappears into his office complex, and reappears with a blue armband for me. It seems I’ve been granted a special privilege, and I
appreciate it. But I’m also confused. I’m touring the museum with the current and the founding directors. And the current director feels he has to give me an armband to take pictures. It won’t stay on, so it has to be pinned. Wouldn’t it be easier to just tell me to go ahead? I mean are the attendants going to call me down with the two directors by my side? I don’t understand the need for this ritual formality, but of course I understand the need to engage in it without question. I’m wondering all the while, though, why it has to be this complicated, and wondering if American customs ritual and propensities are as bewildering to the Japanese as Japanese customs are to Americans. My sense, established from previous trips, and reaffirmed now, is that Japanese and Americans may be the most opposite first world cultures in the world, in spite of our seemingly similar material lives.

There are three floors of paper and paper-inspired art forms in the museum. There’s a very different sensibility here than in America, about what is displayed as art or as artful artifacts. For one, there’s a focus on the clever and skillful use of materials, for their own sake, that would never be displayed in an equivalent museum in the United States. All these items have a certain quality that the world recognizes as Japanese, but I can’t quite put my finger on what it is. I examine clever works using discarded milk cartons. I blow some paper whirligig flowers and make them spin. I examine cartoon figures made of paper representative of famous people in Japan. I examine some amazing folded and cut beetles made by using single sheets of paper and ask myself, “How do you begin to conceptualize that?” Then I realize the issue! The focus in this work is on the body’s understanding, which then becomes integrated by the heart and mind: the opposite, really, of the American way, in which the mind (rather than the body) is approached first in education and in culture, with the hope that mindfulness will lead to integrated heartfelt belief and action (Anderson 1997). In Japan, understanding begins with correct action, the kata (DeMente, 1993), just the opposite of the American way.
In the gift shop I see a packages of paper socks. “Paper socks!” I exclaim to Mrs. Tabata. She looks at me like she’s wondering, “So what about that?” and says “And there are paper clothes there behind you too.” I’m blank, so she adds “Think about other natural fibers: hemp, cotton, linen. It’s no different.” Can they be washed? I ask. “Of course,” she says. “OK,” I say. “Clearly I’m an idiot, trapped within a very restricted cultural understanding of paper.” But to myself I’m thinking, “Woven paper made into socks: “This is just weird,” The next thought was reflection on my reflection: “The Titanic, too, turned slowly,” I told myself.

**Craft: A Way of Being, Teaching, and Learning**

The works in the museum weren’t to be the last of the wonderful paper and paper-related crafts I’d experienced in Mino City. One day during the festival, local artisans opened their studios and shops and demonstrated their crafts to everyone. Mr. Haba, showed scores of children how to make traditional lanterns, in groups of about 10. One sets wooden forms into a frame, that when assembled resemble the slats in the hull of a ship and make up the structure around which the lantern is constructed. The slats have grooves in them that receive and separate a long thin piece of bamboo that makes up the “ribs” of the lamp. To the bamboo ribs one applies rice paper, cut to size, attached by traditional glue, made batch by batch on site. When the whole thing is dry, somehow, ingeniously, it has structural integrity, without the wooden frame, which is disassembled, pulled out of the hole at the top or bottom of the lampshade, and (voile!) you have a paper lantern. Finally, with a coin, one creases the paper between the bamboo ribs so the lantern shade can break down accordion-style for shipping and storage. When Mr. Haba saw me watching the children’s progress intently, he invited me into his home-based shop to make a lantern myself. It’s a labor-intensive process and it took me most of one afternoon to construct and adequately competent lantern. Mr. Haba and Mrs. Haba make 15 or 20 lanterns in a day, and they’re exquisite.
The Habas’ patience in showing my inexperienced hands how to make the lantern reminded me of the previous day when they were working with the children. They displayed a gentle non-judgmental quality and great patience with both the children and me, in modeling correct form and letting us make our own mistakes. In return, the children seemed not to have trauma about the learning process. In spite of obviously being eager to please, to get it right, they also seemed to be willingly and happily engaged with only a minimal fear, if any, of failure. I noticed this reciprocal quality of easy acceptance by adults of children’s ways and work, and children’s self confidence rising from this acceptance in most, if not all, the hands-on activities in the festival. There is no lowering of standards in the technical quality of the crafts being taught and attempted, and yet there is great latitude and reception of the imperfection in being a child, doing the best one can in the process of trying to accomplish the tasks. Adult teachers seem to encourage an attitude of exploratory play, even in tasks that are well prescribed. In this safe space children eagerly do the best they can.

At a Local School

I noticed this same open, exploratory, low stress approach to art making when I visited a local elementary school. Knowing I have a history as a muralist, my hosts arranged for me to see the development of a giant mural on paper, by five and six year-old students. On my arrival, I take off my shoes at the door. There are no slippers my size so I walk down the halls in my socks, and upstairs past a roof deck looking over the city with four year-olds playing in big plastic wading pools. When I arrive at the classroom where the painting is to take place, the students are waiting, for me, standing in an orderly line around a huge piece of paper, made of taped–together pieces of roll (butcher) paper. Maybe 10 meters by five, it takes up most of the floor space in the classroom. There are bowls of black tempera paint distributed at even intervals all around the edges of the paper, with #10 brushes lying neatly beside them. No one
is playing with the paint or the brushes. The children have been instructed that the theme of the mural is “animals you’ve never seen, but would like to.” They’re told to pick up their brushes and bowls, and make line drawings of the animals of their choice, and that they’ll fill in the color at another time. There is absolutely no hesitation in beginning this assignment by anyone.

Some of the children interpret the assignment by drawing fantasy animals, for example, an animal with a mouse’s head, wings, and a lion’s body. Other children draw animals they know to exist but simply have never seen: an alligator, for example. No child stops with one animal. One animal gets made, then another, and another. Some children look at and copy other children's drawings, but most seem to have a clear and predetermined idea of what they want to do and act pretty independently. There is certainty in their mark making, and little adult direction. All solutions seem to be OK. Every child seems to be encouraged. The entire paper canvas fills up with animals. I don’t see anyone step on the wet lines of others’ animals, nor spill any paint from the open bowls. I don’t even see anyone get any paint on him or herself, except one little boy who gets a little paint on his arm. He shows his arm to a teacher. She shrugs it off and sends him back to work. There’s the work to be attended to, more important than a little spilled paint. In the end I can’t imagine how they all avoid walking on their own and others’ work, but they do.

After the animals are drawn, the children sing me a couple of rousing songs led enthusiastically by the schoolmaster. One song is about the insects that come out in the summer, focusing on all the details of that event. Attending to the details that define life seems to be a great strength of the Japanese approach to art education, from what I’ve seen. It shows in the children’s art. On the bulletin board are drawings from a
camp outing this class took previously, organized and guided by the class fathers. It’s clear from the images what was striking about the experience to the children. For example, there was a huge campfire and group singing around that campfire, and there was a river and everyone went swimming.

When I’ve finished looking at the board, the black lines on the new mural are dry, and I want to see the color applied. But that’s for another day, and deferred gratification seems no problem for these children or their teachers. I’m taken back down to the teachers’ room, for (the usual) ritual of tea and discussion. The gym teacher who had been watching over the plastic swimming tubs filled with four-year-olds reappears as a Buddhist monk, obviously of at least equal status with the headmaster. Through my translator, Jane, an Australian, and one of the few non-Japanese in town, I learn that the parents, of whom she is one, are extraordinarily involved in the activities of this school. The mothers, for example, form a committed group that cleans the school from top to bottom every spring. The parents and grandparents volunteer at an extraordinary level for instruction and other supplementary duties. Jane comes in once a week to teach English. She gives me her cell phone number and says she understands how “extraordinarily hard it is to be an outsider here, not understanding the language or the customs.”

Some Facts about Art Education in Japan’s Schools

I’m told that the nursery school we’re in is designed for three to six year-old students. Administered through a Buddhist monastery, it exists as a form of public/private venture similar to American charter schools in that it also receives part of its budget and is certified by the city and the prefecture. In this school, and typically in other nursery schools, art is integrated into the general curriculum every day: the integrated arts including music and movement comprising maybe five hours a week of the total program.

From Jane, I learn that at age six, Japanese children enter the first grade, and from then through sixth grade they typically receive two hours of art instruction a week. Professor Kaneda Takuya later informs me that in Tokyo, an art specialist typically teaches elementary art but that isn’t the case everywhere. For example in Kyoto and Osaka, art in the elementary
school is taught by the classroom teacher. In middle school, students get art for 1, and sometimes two hours a week, taught by an art teacher.

In a general high school, students typically may choose from visual art, calligraphy, or music to fulfill a fine arts requirement. According to Professor Tasuhide, from his experience, maybe 70% choose music, 20% choose calligraphy, and only 10% choose art. These 10% often go on to become art majors in college. If they choose to train to become art teachers, they normally get a four-year degree for elementary, middle school, or high school certification in art, and many go on for the 6-year masters degree.

Students in Japan attend school for about 10 months of the year. The school year begins in April and goes through to the following March with a two-week break for the new year, and another one month break in August during that school year. There is another short school break between school years, in March. The Mino festival is a summer school activity, designed to coincide with the one-month break students get in August. That month is not really considered to be vacation time since students are expected to engage in some homework project or activity and present the evidence to their teachers when they return in September. So the Mino celebration of paper, held in August, also serves this educational function.

A Crayon Engraving Workshop

I was asked to conduct an activity on paper with children as part of my duties for the celebration. I chose to do a crayon-engraving (scratchboard) workshop.

As with all the workshops, it began with a directive and unifying ritual with Professor Tasuhide serving in the ritual introductory role. He motivated the children, thanked the participants, and introduced me as the sensei, the teacher. The project was to draw selected animals that the students choose from slides, apply crayon and then ink to another same-sized sheet, transfer the line drawings, scratch them out and then elaborate and enhance the image through
patterning of the negative space. Taking my cue from what I’d seen earlier, the theme, once again, was exotic animals.1

By 10:00 AM there are about 40 children at the Mino Cultural Hall, and about another 25 adult helpers, as well as some reporters for the local newspapers and a couple of TV crews. About 10 of the adults are art teachers who are actually drawing the images and making the engravings along with the kids. Another 6 to 10 adults are helping children, and three young women are serving as translators. The children all understand bits of English but were too shy to try to speak until one child, an eight-year-old began speaking with me in very fluent English. “You speak excellent English,” I say. “Yes,” she says proudly, “I’m from Belgium.” “Huh?” I thought, “I wonder if she speaks Flemish or French?” But before I could frame a question to make sense of her response, we were on to the topic at hand, something about her developing image. Then even before I could ask, she’d set herself up as a fourth translator, actually my best for the day, and we were both engaged in helping other children with their projects. There’s no better emissary between teachers and students than another committed and knowledgeable student!

The children in the workshop ranged from about five to about 12 years old. From all ages, I was very impressed with the children’s general rendering ability, their keen attention to detail and visual analysis, and sustained ability to focus. Their persistent engagement in the process of seeing in details was remarkable to me. They are totally uninhibited by the prospect of drawing an elephant, and alligator, overlapping and underlapping forms, forms that leave the picture frame or whatever the task may be. When they didn’t know how to go forward they had no qualms about asking for direction.

1 In an interesting twist, I adapted this crayon-engraving project from one developed by Frank Wachowiak, who, years ago, brought the idea to the United States, from Japan. Ironically, I was told this is the first time the workshop members had ever seen a project exactly like this. After the workshop Professor Tasuhide was asked to write up a version of it for a national curriculum project, so, ironically it’s come full circle, back to Japan.
“Please go up to the slide Anderson, Sensei, and show me how the elephant’s toenails work?” or “Please, does the alligator’s eye have this shape or this other one?” “Are the bird’s legs long enough?” “Can you help me see how the tail goes?” The helping adults don’t hesitate to “correct” the children’s images, making changes right on the students’ work. The students accept this unquestioningly, in their quest to get it “right.” As a result, there are children in the group who are very advanced naturalistic renderers by American standards: ten-year-olds who draw like adults.

I usually show children examples of other students’ work that is successful and/or creative in various ways, (“This is a good way to do such and such, oh and here’s another good way to solve the same problem”) but I consulted the adults before using this strategy this in Mino City. Cross-cultural currents are tricky and I’ve learned from experience that you can sink like a stone if you don’t read them right. So I’ve picked up the Japanese strategy of always consulting before I set into any stream of social activity.

This caution comes from my single biggest teaching failure, which took place in Japan a number of years ago, in Donari-cho when I tried to get children who didn’t know me to participate in an interactive critique. About 30 children were sitting on the floor of a gymnasium with two huge children’s murals from The Guernica Children’s Peace Mural Project (Anderson, 1997; kidsguernica.org) hanging in front of them. Imagine being those children. The media were there, watching, the television cameras aimed their way. Newspaper reporters were writing notes and looking on expectantly, as were the mayor, parents, or-of town visitors, and then and this tall, strange, white guy from America starts performing animatedly in English (the translation? Who knows?), trying to get them to talk! And everyone’s watching!

They wanted to perform well and correctly, especially in such a pressure cooker. That’s a universal human trait. But how to do things correctly is culturally specific: different from one culture to another. My American-style open-ended questions with multiple ambiguous possible answers did not make these children comfortable, especially in this performance-based setting in front of the cameras. I’d approached these children with a culturally confusing paradigm, a culturally incorrect approach to teaching and learning.
So they wouldn’t talk. Not at all. They didn’t dare. They had already integrated into their young lives the Japanese principle that the standing up nail gets hammered down (DeMente, 1993). Who wants to be wrong and potentially hammered? Not them. And not me. But there I was, standing, sweating, and being hammered by my own cultural ignorance. It came to me, then, in a flash, how I had noticed my Japanese colleagues consulting on every aspect of going forward with the mural project. It was an "aha!" moment and I vowed then, always to consult with my colleagues in Japan when I’m not sure of how to proceed.

So in Mino, at the crayon-engraving workshop I stopped before I acted and asked, “Is it OK to praise children’s work in front of other children, to use the work as positive examples? “Of course!” the teachers told me. They looked at me bemused, I think mildly incredulous that even I’d ask a question with such an obvious answer. “Arigato,” I said simply, and smiled. But I thought, “Better to consult and be an idiot in private than to be the nail that’s hammered down.” One experience of that was enough.

The materials for the workshop were outstanding. The paper was thicker with a finer, harder surface than what I’m used to in the United States, and the crayons were a richer mix of color-to-wax, providing more intensity of color and more even application. The oil sticks were of higher quality, especially apparent in their consistency in application. Of course, one might expect this quality in a workshop in a traditional crafts town for a celebration designed to garner international exposure. But from my experience, high quality materials seem to be the rule rather than the exception in Japanese art education. For example, the materials used by the children in the nursery school, and from other school visits on other trips to Japan, were of a uniformly high caliber. But to my American eye some of the colors are a little odd, which of course is a culturally constructed construct. Color schemes choices and formulations that are “right” in one culture may not be a given in another: like the color, red, for example. I remembered a mural I’d done with
art education students in Tallahassee, with Sakura colors, brought to me by Professor Abe. “Where’s the red?” I remember one student asking me. “This is it,” I responded. “This isn’t red, to me,” she said. And through American eyes, certainly it wasn’t the fire engine red Americans think of as true red. Rather it had a more magenta cast. But that’s only a currently constructed conception. Who knows what Americans 100 years ago saw as true red, before Louis Prang and Milton Bradley standardized the American color spectrum (Snyder, 2005). I explained this to that student and added, “Isn’t it a good consistency and quality of paint?” “Yea,” she said, “but I wish there were some red.”

Crafts, Ways, and Means

This Japanese respect for materials and emphasis on their quality may come in part from the Japanese propensity to learn through doing, through the kata as I (Anderson, 1997) have reported elsewhere. Attention to process the act of doing something correctly and well seems to come from a different place, a different motivation, a different center, in Japan than in The United States. For example, during the festival, guides took children and adults through the center of the old town to experience the traditional crafts and craftspeople, where they watched one 91-year-old woman, with 50-year-old hands and mostly black hair, join pieces of Washi paper into rolls of 24 sheets, making perfect quarter inch seams. Over and over, using a glue brush and bowl of paste she performed the act of making perfect seams. Her perfect rolls of joined Washi are then used to make shoji screens. On the day of the demonstrations she started working at 10:00 AM and worked straight through until 3:00, in 92-degree heat, bent over her low table, repeating the act of gluing and attaching with seemingly effortless efficiency. “She’s the only one who can do this,” said my guide. “She has no apprentice.” “What will happen when she dies?” I asked. “We don’t know,” he said, “Maybe it will be lost.”
The lantern makers, the Habas, were there in the heat, for hours, showing a stream of small hands how to set up and string the frames and how to apply the paper that would become the lampshade. Another artisan was making (mostly) insects, but also crabs, turtles, and an occasional dog from carved and splintered bamboo. His hands shook so badly I wondered how he was able to do such delicate work. The youngest of the artisans, a fellow in his mid thirties, was making cloth hangings—the “frames”—on which are mounted traditional paintings and pieces of kanji art. His work is as elegant as his shop. A “river” of small, smooth, black stones bordered by a dark wood frame separates his elevated workspace from the walk-in space in the shop.

In another shop, yet another artisan was weaving a su, which is a bamboo screen that’s used for making Washi. It’s the screen I saw in use at the Washi museum, and woven of bamboo fibers about as wide as a heavy pencil line. When one strand is woven in to its end the weaver joins the next piece, end-to-end so expertly one cannot see the joint. The weaving process entails flipping strings weighted by wooden beads back and forth over the loom in an over-under pattern thus securing the bamboo strands together as the structure of the su.

In another shop, a husband and wife team was busy making bamboo brushes, what Americans call Chinese brushes. They had a selection of brushes on display and asked me to guess the kind of hair in each. Represented were raccoon, wild boar, horse, and mixed animal hair. One special brush was made from the first hair of a newborn human baby. Apparently that newborn hair is pointed in such a way as to make a brush that can produce lines more elegant than any other.

Another craftsman was making tatami mats. The mats, he told me were made traditionally of straw, and of a standard size—180 by 90 centimeters—and people built their rooms to fit the mats in various increments: a three mat room, an four mat room and so on. But now, in the
twenty-first century, he says he’s had to adapt, and mostly makes the mats to fit the rooms, rather than vice versa. The mats’ insides have also been altered in the face of modern technologies, consisting of layers of foam, then straw, and a tough plastic covering. The cover, however, is still one of two kinds of tough woven bamboo, and he still makes each mat, on a frame, by hand.

A Way with Children

A group of elementary school girls appeared in their school uniforms as the mat maker and I spoke. The artisan got out some spikes that looked like eight-inch sewing needles, complete with eyes, and invited the girls to stab the mat in progress. They did, stabbing mightily, for all they were worth, leaving around a hundred neat puncture holes in the new mat. No one—not the guides, nor the organizers, nor the mothers—seemed the slightest bit concerned that there were children with sharp tools stabbing something with all their might. And they were right not to be concerned, because no child ever got out of control. No child stabbed anywhere but into the designated mat. Then it was over. They finished stabbing, dropped their tools back on the mat, and went on to the next shop.

I recalled my translator, Jane, from Australia, telling me of an incident when a child at her daughter’s school was acting out violently. Another child told the teacher. The teacher told the second child to go back, and with the other children, approach the violent child and tell him together that they didn’t like what he was doing: that he was ruining things for everyone. The children did that, and the first child stopped misbehaving. “How would that have been handled in Australia or the States?” Jane asked rhetorically. “Right.” I confirmed, picking up immediately on her point. “The control attempt would have come down from the top, from the teacher.” “Right,” she said, “and the kid would have been resentful of the teacher’s authority and tempted to see just how much further he could push the whole affair. But here, authority is located in the group: particularly in the peer group. And it’s really very successful. It’s the Japanese way.” I thought about that some more as the girls placidly walked away from their concentrated stabbing of the tatami mats. Wow! That was intense, I thought, but maybe only for me.
Painting the Town

On the final day of the festival, I didn’t see anyone using a baby’s hair brush, but I did see a master artist use huge 5-inch-round brushes to execute the kanji figures to begin the last workshop. In the morning, two blocks of main street in the old town were blocked off by an amiable police officer on either end. Then black plastic sheeting was rolled and taped to the street and two, one-hundred-meter rolls of Washi paper were laid out on the plastic, and taped down. A hundred children and adults were there to paint. After the usual greetings and formalities they were instructed that one of the paper rolls was for painting “free expressions” and the other was for painting kanji figures. The theme was to be positive expressions of the local environment.

The organizer of this event, a university professor from Tokyo, demonstrates free color painting on one of the Washi rolls. Demonstrating, he accidentally kicks over a whole bucket of blue paint, but makes it into the part of the design. After the free-form color demonstration, two kanji artists, in their 70’s, step up to the second roll of paper. These appear to be masters. One of them, an aesthete, is wearing a traditional blue shirt-jacket with a blue tie, and has painted his fingernails blue. Everyone falls silent. The two masters bow to each other and make a show of inviting the other to go first. The blue artist goes first, contemplating the white paper in front of him, then stooping and dipping his 5-inch brush in a bucket of black paint and deliberately dance-painting a form I was told means strong wind. The second master executes a kanji form expressing cloud.

With the demonstrations over, the children, their parents, and teachers begin to paint, about half the children and adults on each roll. I was really quite astounded at how proficient the children are at executing kanji figures, especially with those huge brushes. They’re (mostly) fearless in approaching the canvas. I was told that many of the images represented peace, kindness, consideration,
and like sentiments. Following from the kicked-bucket color demonstration, the color roll grew increasingly more elaborate, with children expressing a Jackson Pollock fearlessness over the top of their Morris Louis and Helene Frankenthaler ured foundations. In 45 minutes or so, both rolls were, to my eye, full.

The professor from Tokyo drew us all together, but instead of the closing ceremony as I expected he told us that the color brigade was now to attack the kanji field and vice versa, then demonstrated by splashing yellow, then blue, then other colors over the masterful kanji describing a strong wind. Then the blue nailed master carefully considered the color field professor's first demonstrated form on the other roll, and danced another kanji form over the top. Grabbing up their buckets and tools, the children began splashing and dribbling the kanji scroll while others applied kanji to the color field scroll, with wonderful results.

As I watched, I could see the building of community developing through collective execution and ownership of images and indeed collective ownership for the entire project. Community spirit was made manifest through the organizational and logistical aspects of the project. For example, it appeared that, while only a few people were “in charge” of cleanup, cleanup happened quickly and efficiently as the result of many, many hands. With the exception of the kanji masters, everyone, myself included, automatically began to clean up when it was time. Even Murase San. Teams of people, adults and children, cooperatively rolled up the great scrolls of paper, peeled up the plastic, and picked the scraps of tape from the pavement. We carried buckets of water to places where paint had spilled on the street, and most everyone took a turn with the long-handled scrub brushes. Adults and children worked to clean buckets and brushes. Adults helped children get paint out of their clothes, and off their hands and feet. Even the shop owners came out to help. Then, of course, there was a closing ceremony, in which we all confirmed the value of the project and each other.
The Importance of Ritual

There was a formalized ritual and appreciation every day for every activity in the festival. The meeting in the nursery school faculty room and all the opening and closing ceremonies are examples of the importance of formalized ritual in Japanese culture. Unlike North America, where ritual is mostly casual and implicit, in Japan it’s explicit and critical as the cement of common goals and understandings (Rudofsky, 1982; Yamada, 1997). I only gradually came to understand my own symbolic ritual purpose as the foreign dignitary at the celebration events. In the beginning I was quite concerned when Murase would tell me, "You are leading a workshop in kanji, tomorrow," or "You are to lead a workshop in papermaking tomorrow. I'll pick you up at 9:00." “Uh, sure,” I’d say.” Inside I was thinking, “Yikes!!! This wasn’t in the contract!!!! What do I do now????” But it turns out that leading a workshop, in these cases, was a purely ritual task. I was the person who was to tell the children what an honor it was to have them here, how lucky we all are to be doing this, and how I wish them great success with the day’s great sensei. Then in the end I was also expected to tell them what great success we’d all had and to thank them for their participation. In between I was only there for my presence, to lend credence, to be looked at, to be interested, to take my pictures and engage in my journal reflections. Only twice, for the art criticism conference and for the crayon engraving activity, was my ritualized role was also substantive. In all the other instances I was simply a figurehead, used to facilitate group cohesion.

Through this experience I became more deeply aware how ritual confirmation is a critical tool for group construction in Japan. In large ways and small, the different stances of ritual group construction in Japan and America in ritual confirmation are striking, when one knows to look for them in that way. After the final workshop, for example, Mr. Murase took a group of us out to dinner. After eating our dessert, a delicious but next to
impossible-to-manage-with-chopsticks-seaweed-based-gelatinous-stringy dish of stuff, I stumbled through the usual meal-closing ritual: “Gochiso-sama,” I said. After the chorus of response in kind, someone asked me, “What do you say in America, when the meal is over?” “Usually nothing, much,” I said. “Or maybe something like, ‘That was great,’ or you might individually thank the cook. But there’s nothing formal and established that we all do.” There was silence while the group digested this. I could feel them thinking, “Those Americans! What a strange lot,” followed almost immediately by a return to good-naturedly teasing me about my inability to eat sweet jelly strips with chopsticks.

**Final Thoughts**

The organizers wanted to bring international exposure to a festival designed to keep the traditional crafts associated with the making and use of paper alive in Mino, Gifu, Japan. In their wisdom, they brought it to the public through a focus on children, both as the sons and daughters of residents, current consumers, and policy makers, but also as future adults and appreciators of the fine crafts of Mino. This report is evidence of their success in that venture. The vitality of a town and a prefecture as supported by and supporting crafts and craft education is alive and well and being reported on locally, nationally, and internationally.

Beyond that there is great social benefit. As the international figure they brought in, I made friends in Mino. People in Mino made friends with me. We now understand one another in less objectified ways. When people engage in transcultural activity, we are all are changed, whoever we are, and whatever we started out believing. For me, personally, I am realizing I will never get to the bottom of what it means to be Japanese, or what is the “true” nature of Japanese art education, any more than I will ever get to the bottom of what it means to be me. In that context, I come increasingly to understand it is the process, the quest of being engaged with one another in authentic contexts, in authentic relationships, that really matters.

For example, at the end of a day focused on my method of educational art criticism (Anderson, 1995; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005), I was trying to decide to whom I should give thank-you gifts. My friends were discussing this
for what seemed to me an inordinate amount of time. Seeing me fret, my subtle and reliable translator, Mrs. Tabata, came over and told me to be patient, saying that it was no easy thing to decide about who should receive these gifts, because social relations in Japan are very complex. She finished by saying, “Relations, here in Japan, are analog not digital,” and laughed.

I’m still trying to figure out exactly what that means, but I suspect it’s a subtle as the rock garden at Ryoanji, in which one knows from moving around to look, there exist 15 stones, but which are impossible, in spite of the fact you know they are there, to see all at once from any one point of view. They exist, whether they’re visible or not, in relationships that change with every minute movement. And here and now, in Mino City I’m part of a similar system of relationships. I feel confirmed just to be one of the elements, knowing that the changes I experience are reciprocal, that those around me are changed, and changing, as am I. The key to the process of our mutual evolution into people of the world, beyond American or Japanese, is that we’ve all chosen to engage with each other in the web of mutuality.
References


