

PASSION FLOWER

A passion for petals and insects



SELVEDGE 30

As a child in Japan, I was surprised, when my mother undressed, to see bright red under her kimono as she removed her layers of kimono and sashes. Later I learned that while shades of passionate red are commonly used to decorate young women in the blush of youth, after marriage, reds appear only in undergarments, where they keep hidden their zest for life.

In ancient times, various shades of red were specifically named and featured prominently in Japanese textiles and ornaments. For example, Kurenai (Castilian red), Shinku (orange red) and Enji (deep carmine) were achieved through the use of sappan wood or Brazil wood (*Caesalpinia Sappan* L), Asian madder (*Rubia akane*), and the lac insect 'benibana' (*Carthamus tinctorius*). In fact, one definition of the word *iro* (colour) is 'a palette containing red'.

Since the Heian period (794-1185) fabrics dyed with safflower red have been worn close to the skin to evoke physical healing power. Safflower petals, plucked at just the right moment, are fermented, made into a patty called *benimochi*, and processed into a vibrant rouge used by courtiers and courtesans to colour lips and as an accent at the outer corner of the eyes. This precious dye was laborious, thus costly to extract. By its weight it was as expensive as gold. Beni red symbolises style, passion, femininity, and wealth.

Safflower petals yield a range of colour from burning sun red on silk, to neon pink on ramie

but the dye fades over time, which adds another layer of cultural meaning to the Japanese aesthetic of ephemerality. The most elaborate examples are seen in the *kasane*; a garment comprised of a set of two to three layers worn together. While the outer layer may be restrained in pattern and colour, the inside layer has an upper part patterned in a bright red and white design often dyed with *beni-itajime shibori* (carved board clamp-resist dyeing with red).

Chemical dyes were introduced in the late 1800s along with other technologies from the West. Synthetic dyes were developed that were easy to use, colourfast and less expensive. Artisans stopped using natural dyes, except for indigo. Japan's rich history in fibre arts, kimono culture in general, and *beni* in particular were threatened. In an effort to keep this precious dye from becoming a cultural relic, Dr. Kazuki Yamazaki, an authority on natural dyeing, has developed educational textile arts programs at the Tohoku University of Art and Design (TUAD) in Yamagata.

This field-to-studio, seed-to-silk approach connects students with process, environment, and community practice. The culmination of the course is in January when students soak the petals for several hours in cold, clean water to keep the natural dye pure as they perform a series of extractions. The first yields yellow, the next orange, then red and finally, shocking pink.

In contrast to safflower red in Japan is America

cochineal; the quintessential red that swept through Europe in the 16th to 18th centuries as the Spanish conquered the Americas. The dye is extracted from the cochineal, an insect that lives on the *Opuntia* cactus. It came largely from Mexico and was monopolised by the Spanish as a highly valuable trade commodity, ranking in price next to silver and gold. After drying, it was called *grana*. The source of the colour was kept secret to protect the Spanish monopoly. Colonisation led to exploitation of indigenous populations who raised and gathered the insects.

The sweat and blood experience of the indigenous people was eloquently recorded in an installation by Francisco Toledo, one of Mexico's most celebrated contemporary artists, at the Centro des las Artes San Agustin (CASA), with cochineal-coloured water flowing on the fountain steps of the Art Center in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Another art installation, *Chromatica*, a multi-media exhibition, was created by Guggenheim award-winning Mexican artist Tania Candiani at Museo Arte de Contemporaneo de Oaxaca (MACO) in 2015. A room of breeding cactus conveyed a sense of how many of these bugs are needed to colour just one rug or garment. A wall painted with cochineal gave the viewer an intense experience.

I explore the obsession with the colour red in two of my artworks. One, *Valentine Juban*, from the 1980s, is inspired by Japanese tradition and evokes memories of my mother and my ▶





Left; Seiko Aoyama in the late Edo to Early Meiji Period, 1800s, Each 6 panel folding screen is 156 x 366cm The right side/ screen depicts Yamagata region including benibana farming and dye making as well as Harvest festival scene in rural area; the left side/screen depicts shipping of benimochi to Kyoto showing the benibana trade in the city.

Below; Illustrations of cochineal collection in José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez, Memoria sobre la naturaleza, cultivo, y beneficio de la grana..., (Essay on the Nature, Cultivation, and Benefits of the Cochineal Insect), 1777. Colored pigment on vellum.

speculation about Japanese women hiding their passion for life under layers of silks, to be revealed only in moments of intimacy.

In the *Two Lives, Many Lives* series, which I began in 2017, I use cochineal red to evoke the precarious balance of life and death, creation and destruction that is always present, even when making textiles. Fine silk thread is obtained by boiling silk cocoons that contain a living worm, and we extract scarlet pigment from inside the cochineal insects. I transformed the 'carrier rods' (a by-product of silk reeling that forms when reeling machines snag filament on a rod) into small creature-like pieces. I find new life in this waste silk and add red as a reminder that these materials came from living beings. The brief stories of these reds reveal cultural, economic, and aesthetic characteristics of people and places. My art is inspired by the importance of and longing for shades of red.

Bringing safflower-dyed colours into our 21st century life is a difficult task, as the colours can be rather ephemeral against direct UV rays. But the fascination with the traditional practice and the obsession with the colours obtained from the flower petals were revisited by LA based Korean American designer, Christina Kim, and featured at Sonia Park's elegant boutique, Arts and Science, in Tokyo in 2017. Christina was guided by Dr. Kazuki Yamazaki as she designed a beni-coloured fashion collection for us to enjoy and cherish, in all its shades of red. **Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada**

