

WHITE OUT

Cloth from the snow country

The snow always seems to arrive at night, creating an enchanted new world, as a familiar view from a window becomes something mysterious. In Northern Japan, the snow comes thick and fast. Freezing winds over the sea from Russia carry up to a metre of snowfall a day, transforming the island of Hokkaido into a wonderland full of ambiguous forms, from 'snow monsters' to mochiyuki or 'snow that looks like rice cakes'. This all-encompassing whiteness creates an icy palette cleanser between the fiery colours of the Koya celebration in autumn, and the much anticipated arrival of the cherry blossom in spring.

In Japan, a country grounded in Zen Buddhism, to observe the changing seasons is to understand the miracle of life. The term *kenshō*, literally meaning 'seeing nature', is to realise our true self through observation of the world around us. The struggle to express this natural beauty has been the focus of Japanese art and design throughout history, from poetry to painting, textiles, literature and cinema. From the arrival of new snow (*shinsetsu*), snow like crystal sugar (*zarameyuki*), snow blowing up from the earth during a storm (*jifubuki*) to the last or 'forgotten' snow (*wasureyuki*), this form of precipitation has provided clean slates and fresh inspiration for centuries. It has been woven into workwear, clamped into indigo and has enacted economies in the winters of the Snow Country.

'Snow Country' is the poetic term given to areas of Japan that receive the heaviest and longest lasting snow; stretching from Yamaguchi in the south, along the backbone of the Japanese Alps,

across the coast of Honshu to the islands in the north. In an old encyclopedic text, *Hokuetsu Seppu* (Snow Country Tales), Suzuki Bokushi documents the folk crafts, industries and human geographies of these areas during the Edo period. The book contains the first Japanese illustrations of 86 types of snowflake crystal, which became a fascinating motif for makers of textiles and ceramics.

Sekka shibori is an ancient textile process from Arimatsu-Narumi, named after these geometric snow crystals. Sekka, literally meaning 'snow flower', is the name for both the resist dyeing technique and its resulting patterns, so called because of their six-pointed star shapes. The design is created by clamping folded cloth, falling into the broader field of *Itajime shibori*. First, a piece of fabric is pleated lengthways before it is folded along the pleat, either in squares or diagonally to create the 'snowflake' shape. The carefully pleated fabric is then submerged in an indigo vat and dye is allowed to seep between the clamps. Once the fabric has been washed and the clamps removed, it unfolds to reveal an intricate network of indigo lines that shape the undyed areas of cloth, mimicking the complex structures of snow crystals.

In the hands of master craftsmen, patterns can first appear repeated with the utmost precision. But on closer inspection, quite poetically, the organic nature of the process reveals that no two shapes are the same. Although sekka shibori can be created in many colours, the traditional use of indigo over undyed cotton enhances the illusion of

snowflakes emerging out of a dark winter sky, often using different densities of indigo to create incredible optical depth. The natural prevalence of indigo in Japan has nurtured this relationship between snow and cloth. Partly due to the high-yielding and abundant dye plants, the strengthening qualities of indigo on cotton fibres, and the national restrictions of bright colours reserved for the ruling elite, the Edo period became the great age of blue and white. In 1788, Inoue Den, a 12 year-old girl from Kyushu, noticed that her worn indigo clothes had tiny white flecks, like snowflakes, throughout the fabric. When she deconstructed the jacket she realised areas of the cloth had been tied and had therefore resisted the dye. From this moment of realisation Den went on to create one of the most iconic forms of Japanese weaving: *kurume kasuri*.

Kasuri is a kind of ikat textile where the fibres are bound to resist the dye prior to weaving, creating interlocking patterns with feathered edges. Different styles include *tate gasuri* (warp ikat), *yoko gasuri* (weft ikat) or *tate yoko gasuri* (double ikat). Den's early formation of *kurume kasuri* patterns attempted to recreate the 'snowflakes' that she had first noticed in her clothing. Early patterns became known as *hakumonsanran* (scattered white pattern), *yukifuri* (snowfall) or *arareori* (hail-cloth). Hazy flecks of white through the blue evoke a vibrant blizzard, in contrast to the structural snowflake patterns in sekka shibori. A later interpretation of these patterns is *yukinko kasuri*, or 'snowball', which creates white spotted cloth. The mischievous name for this design ▶





comes from folk tales created by rural communities of the Snow Country, bewitched by the falling snow. Yuki-Onna is the legendary snow woman who approaches passers-by and asks them to hold her child, the Yukinko. As soon as the person touches the child, they turn to ice.

A town in the heart of Snow Country called Ojiya has become famous for a craft process that calls on the heavy snow to create a very unique fabric. The process of Ojiya Chijimi, or Echigo-jofu, produces a prized crepe ramie through spinning, weaving and 80 days of snow bleaching. The process is entirely dependent on the natural rhythms of the darkest winters which provide the perfect conditions for creating a light airy fabric ideal for summer kimonos. In his encyclopaedia Bokushi documents the process: 'The thread is spun and twisted in the snow, the cloth is woven in the snow, it is washed in snow waters and bleached in snow fields. There is crepe because there is snow.' Without it, this extraordinary crepe would not be possible. Even the humidity beneath the snow is thought to provide the optimum conditions for twisting the ramie threads into especially fine strands, creating the unique texture of the crepe. Registered as an UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, Ojiya Chijimi is a safeguarded craft, and it certainly needs gentle nurturing if it is to survive in the modern world. Today the snow continues to capture our imagination and ignites a sense of wonder. The whiteout provides the clean slate from which to rekindle our relationship with nature, and look at our surroundings in an enchanted new light. *** **Sophie Vent**