**Hirose-gasuri Center**

*Kasuri* is a traditional Japanese textile technique in which threads are dyed to form geometric or pictorial patterns when woven into cloth; the name refers to the distinctive blurred edges of the design patterns. The town of Hirose in Yasugi was the center of a vibrant *kasuri* industry from 1825 until the early twentieth century, with many unique design features developed over this time. The Hirose-gasuri Center was established in 1985to promote this valuable local craft tradition. (*Kasuri* is pronounced *gasuri* when part of a compound word.)

*A Technique Found Throughout Asia*

*Kasuri* is a variation of the ikat technique, which has a long history in Asia. The word “ikat” is Malay/Indonesian, but the technique is believed to have begun in India. Beautiful silk textiles created with this method were brought to Japan via China in the eighth century, and are preserved in the Shosoin Imperial Repository in Nara. The technique became highly developed in the Ryukyu Kingdom (modern-day Okinawa) beginning in the twelfth century, and was brought to southern Japan after the Satsuma clan of Kyushu invaded Ryukyu in 1609. By the mid-eighteenth century, this weaving technique had spread as far as the Nara region in central Japan, and was applied to inexpensive and durable cotton, which made it affordable to many households. Hirose was one of several well-known *kasuri* production centers in Japan that emerged in the early nineteenth century, and its popular products were shipped throughout the country.

*A Detailed and Laborious Process*

Weaving high-quality *kasuri* by hand is extremely labor-intensive, and involves a series of more than 30 steps. It typically requires two to three months to weave a length of cloth sufficient to make a kimono—one *tan*, which is about 13 meters long and 38 centimeters wide**.**

The cotton threads commonly used in Hirose-gasuri are laid out on long wooden frames so that they can be marked with the design prior to dyeing. For Hirose-gasuri, reusable paper stencils, some of which have been in use for generations, are employed in this process. The key to *kasuri* lies in preventing the dye—usually natural indigo—from reaching specific sections of the threads in order to preserve white areas and form the woven pattern. Hirose-gasuri uses the most traditional method of binding the skeins tightly with rough hemp fiber in the desired places so that the dye cannot penetrate. The skeins are then dyed in large vats of indigo and then unbound, washed, and dried, whereupon the thread is ready for weaving. The design and dyeing process is based on careful calculation, and the weaver must maintain accuracy, placing each thread precisely. The binding of the skeins and the weaving of the cloth were traditionally done by individual households, sometimes assisted by children.

*Motifs and Patterns*

The Hirose-gasuri Center has many fine examples of local *kasuri* weaving on display, along with a collection of well-preserved antique pattern samples. Whereas *kasuri* patterns initially tended to be small and geometric, more elaborate pictorial patterns developed later in the nineteenth century. The *kasuri* craftspeople of Hirose mastered the use of large, bold pictorial motifs that featured auspicious symbols like the crane and turtle, which represent longevity, or other good-luck symbols such as carp or lucky gods. These motifs were then skillfully combined with large geometric patterns, which often appear to be overlaid on each other in dynamic opposition. Simpler geometrical patterns were more likely used for work clothing and kimonos, while bold pictorial patterns were popular for kimonos, floor cushions (*zabuton*), curtains (*noren*), and futon covers, all of which have large areas that could display the motifs to good effect.

The focus of the Hirose-gasuri Center is on teaching. Ongoing instructional programs make use of the center’s more than 30 traditional looms. Visitors are invited to participate in short indigo-dyeing workshops, to make purchases from the large variety of Hirose-gasuri textile products on display, and to sample local soba noodles at the center’s soba shop.