

Local Color: Tokamachi Textile Dyeing

To complement its rich weaving tradition, Tokamachi has developed textile dyeing. Thanks to the heavy winter snowfalls, the area has an abundance of soft water, which is ideal for dyeing. As snowmelt is absorbed into the ground, mineral content that might interfere with color fixing is filtered out, leaving behind the pure water needed for steaming and rinsing dyed fabric.

For plant-based textiles like Echigo *jofu*, the threads are generally dyed *before* they are woven. One approach closely associated with Tokamachi is a resist-dyeing technique called *kasuri* (blurred patterns). Dyers knot separate cotton threads around the main thread according to a pattern. The cotton threads prevent the dye from penetrating, keeping sections of the main thread white. On the loom, the white sections line up to create an image or pattern. Naturally, this challenging technique requires precise calculations of length, a thorough understanding of the strength and flexibility of the material, and knowledge of the dimensions of the loom.

With silks, dyeing is usually done *after* the weaving in a resist-dyeing technique called *yuzen*. Pieces of white silk many meters long are hung like hammocks across a workshop and stretched taut with flexible, needle-tipped bamboo sticks. Onto this smooth surface, dyers first apply a resist paste to areas they do not want to dye and then use brushes to apply dye to the areas they do. It requires years of training to get an even coat and prevent unwanted variations in color saturation over the length of the cloth. Designs can be done freehand, but workshops more commonly use stencils of a fixed size, similar to screen printing. Generally, each stencil corresponds to one color layer, and properly lining up successive stencils to ensure dye is applied only to the appropriate place is another skill that requires careful practice. After the dye is applied, the cloth is steamed to fix the color and then rinsed to remove the resist paste and residual dye. The process may be repeated several times depending on the pattern. Typically, the cloth's background color is applied last.

Another dyeing technique used on silks is called *shibori*, a kind of tie-dying. Tiny bits of cloth in neat rows are knotted up or stitched with individual threads; then the fabric is soaked in a vat of dye. The dye only partially penetrates the tied areas, creating *shibori*'s characteristic spotted pattern and gradations of color.

Local dyeing culture continues to evolve, and silk dyers in Tokamachi have recently begun combining *yuzen* and *shibori* to produce highly innovative patterns for kimonos.