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<https://www.design.leeds.ac.uk/events/katagami-and-symbolism-with-mamiko-markham/>

Katagami are stencils used for dyeing a pattern on fabrics.

The "Kata" meaning, a cut design, cut shape or design form.

And "gami" meaning paper.

The process of using Katagami to dye fabric is called Katazome.

My work for the MoDA Katagami project includes analysis of images of the katagami created using an infrared camera. This can reveal marks such as stamps and signatures which are no longer visible due to age.

These assist in determining dates, geographical origins and the Katagami merchant names of each specific stencil.

Katagami are made of paper. They require the finest quality hand-made Washi paper produced from the bark of the mulberry tree alone. And are usually made by combining three layers of paper, with grain in different directions to aid stiffness. These are glued together and coated with "Kakishibu" persimmon tannin or lacquer.

Kakishibu and lacquer darken with age. Also the ink stamps and writings fade with time and use. Consequently these markings become difficult to identify by the naked eye alone. And additional lacquer repairs also compound the problem.

The Silver Studio Katagami collection consists of around 400 pieces.

The collection was photographed with an infrared camera. Infrared photos are able to reveal information not normally visible.

Identifying Katagami – Stamp mark

Here is a good example of an infrared photograph revealing a merchant's stamp.

In this case, the Katagami merchant "Shimamura", from Shiroko in Mie prefecture.

He ran a Katagami merchant business from 1828 to 1863 and was also successful in Edo. This Katagami is considered to have been made in Edo between 1828 and 1863.

In some cases it may necessary to inspect both the front and back of Katagami.

However, it's also necessary to gain information from both the regular and IR photographs to determine correct further historical information.

Washi paper was very valuable and not regarded as a disposable item.

Katagami makers often recycled washi for their use. Written letters and documents can contain dating information for the Katagami. Also occasionally, revealing important historical content.

Identifying Katagami - Ink handwritings

In this example, the Katagami has no merchant name stamps. However the IR image enables reading of the recycled letter, giving a date not earlier than 1864.

In the Meiji period (after 1868), the use of recycled paper in Katagami increased more than in the Edo period. During the Edo period, Katagami merchants were protected with trade rights and other benefits. In the Meiji era these benefits disappeared, so they suffered financially.

Also many of the lord generals who supported the Katagami merchants were forced to commit Seppuku at the end of the Edo period.

Many working class people became confused and poor under the new government promoting westernisation.

As a result, the Katagami makers increased the use of recycled paper.

In this Katagami, information of one such lord general was written:

Masayoshi HOTTA (birth 1810, death 1864). He was the fifth lord of the Domain and held the position of Roju (member of shogun's council of elders). He lived until 1864 in Chiba (near Edo city). The written calligraphy characters are obviously of the late Edo era (1780~1867).

Identifying Katagami - Looking into the quality and techniques

Here, the top image is the same Katagami. It is clearly obvious that the writing is barely legible in an ordinary photograph.

At this point, there is confusion as to whether this Katagami was made in the end of Edo period (between 1864 and 1867) or in the Meiji era (after 1868).

Therefore I needed to find information by other methods. In fact, there is also information to be found in the ordinary photograph of the Katagami.

These Katagami both feature the same "cut out sign", called "Gara boshi".

They are a pair, called "Nimai-gata". Both are needed to dye the complete design.

A stencil by its nature must have parts which connect to each other or otherwise just fall apart. Two-piece (or more) stencil sets may be used for complicated designs.

The first or base stencil is called the "Main stencil" (omo-gata) and the second stencil applied on top is the "Erasing Stencil" (keshi-gata).

This Katagami carving technique was difficult and could only be done by veteran artisans. It indicates the Katagami artisans' skill in practice in the middle to late Edo period (1700-1867).

During that time, Katagami applied by this technique were 3 to 5 times the price of ordinary "Chu-Gata" Katagami.

Identifying Katagami The “Gara Boshi” “cut out sign” - A pair of Katagami (Nimai-gata) Both needed to dye the complete design.

Here is another "Nimai-gata" Katagami, showing the two stencils and the "Gara boshi" cut-outs. From looking at Katagami, it is very difficult to appreciate how the dyed pattern will appear. The Katagami are used to apply "Nori" glue resist, which keeps those parts un-coloured. This method allows those pieces which hold the stencil together, to be hidden by resist from the second stencil. It should be noted that the Katagami are intended to be “tiled”, both across and down the length of fabric. Exact registration must be accomplished over the fabric for each Katagami in the set.

Completion of this requires intelligence and an outstanding level of skill by master class Katagami artisans.

I made the replicated image to illustrate the actual dyed result.

Identifying Katagami - Looking into the trend of pattern designs

Example-

In terms of the trends of pattern design, half of the SS collection have strong similarities with the kimono patterns in Ukiyoe paintings of the late Edo period time, 1804 to 1867.

Ukiyoe artists, such as Hokusai, Kuniyoshi and Kunisada were sometime involved with Kimono pattern design in the Edo (Tokyo) region during those times.

"Pattern Design Manual" by Katsushika Hokusai 1814 - 1867

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 1842~1852

At top right is a famous Ukiyoe work by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, showing a sparrow kimono pattern design very similar to Katagami in the Silver Studio collection. Ukiyoe paintings played a leading role in fashion trend-setting during the 17th to 19th centuries.

Such information may assist in building research results.

Identifying Katagami - The quality of techniques and pattern designs

In this example, let's examine technique to find Katagami origin.

The Katagami has the stamp mark of "Shimamura" I showed previously.

This stamp itself indicates high skill level.

The technique used is called "Itokake", for keeping the shape of the pattern in place.

The Katagami is carved in two pieces together. They are then separated and reinforced with silk and bonded together.

This technique is symbolic of the advanced skill of female Katagami artisans in the late Edo period (1780-1867). They also applied a similar skilful technique, called "Itoire". The "Itokake" technique is older than "Itoire" and is seen in Katagami produced up to 1830.

Ukiyoe artist Eisen drew on the kimono of a Geisha "Koi carp climbing waterfall" pattern around 1830.

In addition, the business of "Shimamura" started in Edo in 1828.

From these pieces of information, this Katagami is considered to be made in Edo by "Shimamura" close to 1830.

Identifying Katagami -Exploring the export to the West period.

During the Meiji period when the country opened in 1868, many Katagami were sold, finding their way to foreign collectors.

This Katagami was collected by Arthur Silver (1853-1896). It seems this was exported to London between 1880 and 1891 during the period of the Japonisme movement. The South Kensington Museum also purchased about 600 sheets of Katagami common to this in 1891.

Therefore, this Katagami is definitely produced before 1891 in Japan.

Identifying Katagami -Exploring the export period to the West

During the Meiji era, Katagami merchants started producing Katagami for export. These were low-technology, mass-produced Katagami with most using recycled paper.

These Export Katagami were never intended for the purpose of dyeing in Japan. They were purely decorative items and had no need for merchant stamps.

There are about 35 sheets of Export Katagami in the Silver Studio collection.

These Katagami display a poor level of craftsmanship in cutting quality and technique.

The designs are a mixture of Japanese and Chinese. Obviously not of a traditional Japanese nature.

Also, the border frame stops any chance of tiling the pattern.

So where did this unexpected design idea of mixed Japanese and Chinese with a frame come from?

Some of these designs can be recognised as being copied from "STUDIES IN DESIGN", a book published 1876 by Christopher Dresser, a researcher for the South Kensington Museum.

A few months after Dresser had published his book, he went to Japan. It is considered that this book found its way into the hands of the Japanese government. He presented a letter of introduction from the South Kensington Museum along with many gifts to the Meiji government. He received exceptional treatment during his research travel in Japan as an honoured guest and gave export advice on craft affairs.

The Meiji government encouraged the export crafts until around 1890.

Following this, Katagami merchants produced "Export Katagami" from around 1880 to 1890, under the influence of Dresser's designs.

Identifying Katagami - Exploring the export period to the West

Katagami exported in the Meiji period can be divided into 5 categories.

The first 2 feature good quality, skilled work.

They either contain stamps and marking, or do not.

The next 2 are also of good quality, skilled work. But use recycled paper and are divided into 2 time periods.

Lastly, low skilled Katagami made in the Meiji period using the recycled paper.

Then let's take the research results are analysed.

- 1 The contents of the recycled paper are those of the late Edo period (1780-1867). It was made after 1865.
- 2 There are no Katagami merchant stamps on this Katagami.
- 3 This Katagami maker had high skill level, therefore he/she had been making quality Katagami from recycled paper even after becoming independent in 1865 (end of Edo) to 1891 (Middle of Meiji).
- 4 The pattern design is endemic of Katagami from around 1842 to 1852, but was a high quality reproduction made between 1865 (end of Edo) and 1891 (Middle of Meiji).
- 5 The 1 and 3 fact shows that area of producing is considered to be Tokyo or east of Tokyo.
- 6 This Katagami was exported to London around 1880 to 1891. Therefore it was definitely made before 1891.

I think it is worth mentioning here that the person (the artisan) who actually produced a Katagami is virtually impossible to identify. Most of these artisans were farmers. They produced Katagami in the less labour intensive times of the farming year. The merchants bought the Katagami, placing their stamp on them. When the Meiji era started (1868), many artisan farmers started their own businesses, some trading directly with dyeing studios, but remaining nameless.

Data Analysis Conclusions

In summing up,

My initial approach was to search for those with "Gara boshi", the "cut out" signs, to find sets or parts of sets.

Then I looked into the quality of techniques present and of pattern design trends. These produced an initial sort order starting point.

Along with my research in Japan, I found the merchant names of about 60 stamps up to 1867 for 100 Katagami. For Katagami containing recycled paper (about 200) and other ink markings and calligraphy, I translated all that was readable. This was problematic due to the extent of ancient characters used; which required research in itself.

Information gained from examination of the traces of silk threads in those using the "Itokake" and "Itoire" techniques provided source data for dating and geographical origin.

As mentioned before, half of the SS collection is of high quality late Edo period. The other half is divided between "export" Katagami and those of average quality for domestic use.