

## SPOTLIGHT: Fireman's Coat



El Presenter: Ginger Beck

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Title of Piece: Fireman's Coat

Year created: 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Artist: Unknown

Eight most essential aspects of this work of art:

1. The textile is washed and cut and sewn into the desired shape. The cloth is stretched on a frame using bamboo poles, which makes the surface smooth and wrinkle free. The design is sketched onto the cloth with a pencil or a piece of charcoal. A rice-paste resist made of water, lime and rice flour is drawn over the design using a tube called a tsutsu.
2. The tsutsu typically has two parts. A cone shaped chamber made of paper treated with persimmon juice, and a metal or bamboo tip with an opening. As the chamber is squeezed, paste is extruded through the tip. The width of the line varies with the size of the tip's opening. This paste-resist method is called tsutsugake.

3. When the design has been completed, rice bran is sprinkled over the paste to hasten drying. Then resist paste is drawn on the textile's other side in exactly the same pattern, insuring a clean, dye-free design under the paste on both sides of the fabric. The piece is then allowed to dry. If certain design elements are to be colored with dye other than the blue of indigo, the other colors are brushed on at this stage. The fabric is then coated with a mordant made from ground soybeans and water, to help fix the dyes. Finally, a coating of rice paste is applied over them on both sides of the fabric.
4. When the garment is dry, the stretcher is removed, and the piece is immersed in a dye bath. In the case of an indigo dye bath the number of times the cloth is immersed determines the darkness of the blue color. It is possible to preserve a light blue color by covering it with paste after the first or second immersion and then proceeding to dip the piece many more times in order to obtain a darker surrounding color. After the piece is allowed to dry completely, it is placed in hot water to soak until the rice paste softens. Then the remaining paste is scraped off, and the piece is again soaked in hot water. Finally, it is stretched again and allowed to dry. From beginning to end, depending upon the weather and other factors, the process takes about twenty days to complete.
5. The Fireman's coat, which is reversible, consists of two or 3 layers of cotton which is then stitched with a running stitch over the entire garment, using 6-7 stitches per inch. The stitching is called, sashiko. A typical fireman's outfit included underwear, a hood, a short coat, a long coat, trousers, and mittens. This entire outfit was covered with sashiko stitching.
6. As firefighters would arrive at the scene of a fire they would douse each other with water. This drenched clothing could weigh anywhere from 70-100 pounds. The evaporation of the water as they were exposed to the heat of the fire helped to keep the firefighters cool, and the thickness of the fabric protected them from falling objects. Their attack in a fire was to raze all the structures in the path of the fire asB. quickly as possible to prevent the spread of flames. They would do this with a tobiguchi, which was a tall pole that had at the top a metal hook in the shape of a tobi bird's beak. Hence, Edo firefighters were affectionately called tobi.
7. While fighting fires the coats were worn plain side out. On the inside of the coat, the painted designs were assertive and dramatic, reflecting the individual taste of the wearer. The designs were intended to heighten the wearers' courage and lessen their fear. But, once the fires were out, the coats were reversed, exposing the bold and colorful designs on the inside The firefighters would then parade triumphantly through the streets for the cheering townspeople.
8. These extremely popular townsmen firefighters, immortalized in ukiyo-e prints as symbols of masculine glamour and ideals, held a special status within their community,

Possible questions to use when discussing this piece with museum visitors:

1. If you owned this coat where or when would you wear it?
2. DO you like the style or color?
3. Does it look reversible?
4. How would you describe the pattern on the coat?

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