

## **Modernizing Boro: Upcycling apparel with a past**

**Lynn M. Boorady, State University of New York College at Buffalo, NY**

**Keywords: Upcycling, Boro, Sashiko, Sustainability**

Fast fashion, which promotes rapid deliveries bringing new garments to fashion forward retailers and consumers, has created a supply chain model producing clothing at increasingly low prices. Indeed, prices that are so low that many consumers consider this clothing to be disposable. However, this overconsumption of apparel leaves an environmental nightmare in its wake. Americans throw away approximately 70 pounds of clothing per year, which results in textile waste making up 5% of our landfills (Claudio, 2007). This study looked at recapturing used garments and making them wearable again to extend their lifecycle from weeks to decades.

Boro is a Japanese word for “rags” and specifically indicates a patched and mended fabric or garment which was worn mainly by peasants. Out of necessity, these garments were patched over the lifetime of the wearer and were passed down to the next generation. Due to this patching method each boro is unique.

Sashiko is a functional running stitch done by hand used to stitch fabrics onto a garment to patch and reinforce, creating the boro style. On older extant garments, sashiko is a plain running stitch usually with rows of stitches running parallel to each other, though it is not unusual to see grids as well. While it is known that boro was practiced as early as the Edo period in Japan (1615-1868), by the Meiji era (1868-1912) we see additional geometric patterns emerging in the sashiko work (Wada, 2004).

Boro is the complete opposite of our current “throw away” economy. Mending clothing not only extends garment life, it can add emotional value, and create a personal story. Mending allows the wearer to capture the most value for the longest period. Some modern designers look at boro for inspiration, such as recent collections by Junya Watanabe, Ralph Lauren and Kapital. In current fashion, boro can be used as a style statement as it aligns with current trends, particularly threadbare denim.

In this study, jeans collected from family members were cut apart to preserve as much of the fabric as possible. Based on the shape and amount of fabric, a new garment was ideated that would use as much of the fabric as possible. Once the design was finalized, the pattern pieces were drawn on the jeans. Samplers of sashiko stitching were created in a variety of designs. Holes and worn sections of the fabric were then patched with naturally dyed cotton fabric using sashiko stitches. The new garment was then assembled.

While the use of sashiko can be applied to a well-worn area of current clothing, as was done in the past, this method of creating new clothing may be appealing to a generation which craves

newness and yet is also concerned about the environment. Future studies will include non-traditional samplers being developed to determine the hand created on a variety of fabrications and create modern stitching designs. The audience will learn about traditional sashiko designs, view original garments and see modern interpretations of this ancient craft.

Claudio, L. (September 2007). Waste couture: The environmental impact of the clothing industry. *Environmental Health Perspectives*. 115 (9) pp. A448-A454

Wada, Yoshiko Iwamoto. (2004). Borono Bi: Beauty in Humility – Repaired rags of old Japan. Textile Society of American Symposium Proceedings, 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Symposium. pp. 278 – 284