



We've been delivering cool Japanese fabric from Takashima in Omi since the Edo period.

Takashima Crepe was first produced in the Edo period and it's been popular ever since.

The same tradition continues today.

Takashima Crepe is a unique embossed fabric. Because of its excellent hygroscopicity (ability to absorb moisture from the air), it is pleasant to wear in Japan where the climate is hot and humid. It is used for various garments including underwear, sportswear, casual clothes, nighties, and kimonos.

From the Tenmei period (1781-1789) to the end of the Edo period (1868)

Takashima crepe began to be produced from this period as a clothing fabric. As a side occupation during the winter months, farm families would spin the yarn on a spinning wheel and produce the cloth using a handloom. Despite the paltry scale of production, the additional income was thought to have been considerable for the farmers; indeed, the practice was so lucrative that in 1844 the Wakebe clan, which ruled southern Takashima County at the time, even issued a notice prohibiting its production for a time as a hindrance to farm work, excepting only a few villages deemed to be the fabric's main producing region. This was the arrangement under which the uncut fabric woven by farmers was collected by fabric wholesalers and sold to other fabric wholesalers in the Kyoto and Osaka areas. The product was transported by boat (across Lake Biwa) and unloaded at the port of Omizo (now Katsuno in the Town of Takashima). In the early 1780s, Shimaya, a dry-goods dealer located in what was then the Shinjo district of Shin' asahicho, purchased some cotton wool and persuaded some local cottage-industry operators to spin cotton on handlooms (to a width of about 27cm). He brought the cloth to two dealers in Kyoto, Iwasaki (later Mitsubishi Corporation) and Mitsui (later Mitsui & Co.). The dealers were impressed. Sales flourished and sales channels expanded, and Shimaya added new products to their lineup to cater to a range of customer tastes.

Early Meiji period (circa 1879)

When Shimaya developed a kind of brocade called ukiori ("floating weave"), sales channels broadened further. (In this type of brocade, silk thread is mixed with the cotton thread of the dark blue cloth, the weft is twisted, or stranded, at both ends, and patterning equipment is used to make the warp "float," rather like seersucker.)

Middle Meiji period (circa 1880-1890)

No advances were made in the production process for Takashima Crepe during this time, so as production volume rose, so did the output of shoddy goods (loss of color, numerous flaws in weaving, etc.). For a time the producing region suffered a decline in reputation. The problem reached its nadir in 1884-1885. For a time, sales of Takashima Crepe were badly outstripped by wares from other producing regions in Japan, such as Joshu Crepe and Awa Crepe. In a bid to regain the upper hand, in 1886 the Omi Cotton Crepe Sales Association was established. By unifying weaving standards and tightening product inspection, the Association sought to prevent the mass production of inferior goods.

Late Meiji period (circa 1890)

At this time the supply of motive power from water wheels began to be added to weavers' production equipment. Pattern looms were introduced, and industrial production began in earnest. Large numbers of women were employed from other prefectures to do the weaving. For the raw material, yarn was sourced from major spinning companies that had emerged as full-grown industrial concerns throughout Japan. For the stranding process, in which the weft was forcefully twisted, water-powered stranding machines came into use around this time, contributing mightily to both product development and quality improvement. Enterprise formations using the waters of the Kamo and Ado Rivers began to handle the bleaching and dyeing (switching as they did so from Japanese to Western bleaching).

In 1900 the Omi Cotton Crepe Sales Association reorganized into the Takashima Crepe Industry Association. In addition to its forerunner's brief of unifying standards and inspecting products, the new Association was tasked with improving the quality of woven goods and diversifying the lineup of woven cotton goods produced. To achieve the latter purposes, the Association employed two graduates of the Kyoto Municipal Dyeing and Weaving School to travel Japan for seven years, encouraging merchants to display their wares in the nation's shop windows. The Association also convened study groups and training sessions, aiming to guide producers in improving their technology.

These efforts to modernize processes and bolster technology succeeded in improving the quality of the producers' wares, and sales channels recovered. A wide range of products were developed, some of which even earned prizes at trade fairs overseas. (By this time the previous dyed crepe had mainly given way to undyed crepe, as the industry shifted from small- to industrial-scale production.) It was about this time that Takashima Crepe came to be recognized nationwide.

Around 1909 crepe shirting made with thin fabric of one-sided twisting found sales channels outside Japan, and this "crepe fabric" began to be woven in large volumes. Bolts of woven cloth were typically about 60cm wide in this period. (Some records indicate that about 60% of this fabric was exported, while the rest was consumed domestically, according to History of Takashima Textiles.) Brisk exports had spurred the installation of more machinery, until by around 1907 the market was glutted. A few years later, crepe underwear called "suteteko shirts" ("long-underwear shirts") began appearing on the Japanese market as luxury goods; demand rose and conditions recovered. Crepe processing using embossing machines got under way as bleached-cotton producers in Kyoto and Osaka imported the machinery from Italy. A number of bleached-cotton plants are believed to have been operating in Kyoto and Osaka at this time, among which was the Yamatogawa Dyeing Plant. As for Takashima County, records show that one individual involved in textile processing imported machinery in 1906. After a short while, one bleached-cotton company in Kyoto called Tomiyama Bleached-Cotton Plant introduced an embossing machine made in Japan (by Yuriroll Co., Ltd.). As costs plummeted and quality soared, demand for Takashima Crepe skyrocketed. Yuriroll had a factory that produced the barrels for cannon used by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The company held a technology that prevented the cores of the barrels from becoming misaligned by the heat of repeated firing. Because embossing machines used steam heat to impress patterns on crepe, preventing misalignment of their cores was similarly crucial to the quality of the product. A century later, Yuriroll continues to produce embossing machines, which are in active use today.

Origin of the term suteteko: The term is said to originate from the phrase suteteko odori, "suteteko dance." Around 1880, San' yutei En' yu the First (1849-1907) performed an uproarious dance in a vaudeville show, sparking dance craze at banquet halls across Japan. (The dance was so named because the dancer appears to imitate the action of pinching his nose and throwing something away while wearing short

underpants and kimono in jinjinbashori style (lifting kimono's rear hem and inserting it into the knot of sash).)

San' yutei En'yu the First (1849-1907): Born Kintaro Takeuchi. Nicknamed "Big-nose En'yu," this comedian gained popularity for his trademark dancing style, suteteko odori or suteteko.

San' yutei En'yu excelled in sketches such as "Anadoro," but he also reworked classic yose (Japanese vaudeville) sketches such as "Nozarashi" and "Funatoku."

Early Showa period (circa 1920)

Electricity began to be used as a source of motive power. The application for textiles shifted radically from Japanese-style clothing to Western clothing. Textiles were generally sold in bolts 39 inches (about 99cm) wide.

1929

The New York Stock Exchange crash of 1929 touched off a worldwide Depression. In the protectionist mania that ensued, Japan became isolated (Japan was expelled from the League of Nations in 1933). The United States boycotted imports of Japanese cotton products, causing sales to plummet.

1937

Textile raw materials, production and sales became subject to regulation by law in Japan.

1943

The Second World War intensified.

The Japanese government passed a law requiring 40% of productive machinery to operate as usual, 20% to be idled and the remaining 40% to be converted to military-production use.

1945

End of the Second World War

Circa 1950

Under American occupation, restrictions on textiles were lifted.

With her productive capital depleted and her cities ravaged by devastating air raids, Japan suffered shortages of virtually everything until about 1950. A wave of prosperity ensued from 1950 to 1953 due to black-market demand arising from the Korean War. The good times continued, as the period from the postwar depression to the late 1970s was an era of astonishing growth for Japan.

Circa 1960-1970

When demand for crepe underwear reached its peak, some 100 million meters of the cloth was produced annually in Japan, with Takashima Crepe accounting for roughly half of that total. Large numbers of women were hired in groups, locally and from every part of western Japan, to work in the crepe mills of Takashima County. The bleached-cloth plants, where final processing of the cloth was performed, was established jointly among the crepe producers, forming a seamless production system in this major crepe producing region. This was also a time when a number of new entrants joined the textile industry. Typical width of a bolt of cloth was 60 inches (152cm) at this time.

Until this time, twisting ("stranding") of the cotton fibers was performed using Hatcho water-powered stranding machines. Because of the many farmers weaving crepe as a side business, the installed base of these machines in southern Takashima County is estimated to have been considerable (some 200 to 300 machines). Textile production volume at this time was about 50m per day per machine.

Circa 1975

The low cost and excellent quality of Japanese-made textile products spurred enormous exports to the United States. Unable to compete internationally, US textile producers petitioned their government to slap restrictions on imports from Japan. As one condition for the return of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, the Japanese government decided to impose "voluntary" restrictions on the volume of textile exports to the United States, despite vociferous opposition from the domestic textile industry. The effect was a de facto quota on US imports of Japanese textiles. Hitherto devoted wholeheartedly to exports, Japan's textile sector now switched to a more balanced approach, serving domestic as well as overseas demand. Domestic demand was brisk from 1970 to the fall of 1973, amid a record-breaking consumer culture. (This was the era when disposable products came into vogue.)

The energy crisis of fall 1973 put an end to this growth spurt. In retaliation for Israel's victory in the Yom Kippur War, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries raised the price of oil and curtailed supplies. For Japan, which obtained half of its energy from imported oil, the impact of this "oil shock" was tremendous. Shortages spread and prices spiked. In a bid to rein in inflation, the government tightened the money supply. This move only exacerbated the problem, as the rising orders of the inflationary period gave way to a dearth of new contracts and cancellation of existing ones. Operating rates declined and inventories mounted, causing prices to drop precipitously.

Around this time applications for crepe (Takashima Crepe) expanded from underwear into pajamas and casual wear. Although demand for underwear slipped to a third of its peak, demand in these other areas offset this decline. With the need to streamline and improve the quality of stranding processes, crepe manufacturers introduced a wide range of machinery, significantly rationalizing production.

Circa 1985

In 1985 the finance ministers of the world's advanced countries met in New York. In what became known as the Plaza Accords, the ministers agreed that the Japanese yen and the German deutschmark were undervalued, and vowed to correct his situation.

Over the ensuing 10 years the Japanese yen rose from ¥260 to the dollar to ¥79. Imports boomed, Japanese exports lost competitiveness, and Japan became an importer of textiles. The shift to offshore production was dramatic.

From 1996 to 1998

The formerly appreciating yen switched to depreciation. In 1997 its average value was ¥129 to the US dollar, some 50% below its peak. Concerns about imported products ("Prices are cheap but quality is poor" ; "We can't get the products we want" ; "flexible production is impossible" ; "with costs going up every year, the advantages of chasing cheap products are wearing thin" ; etc.) prompted consumers to look at domestic products with new eyes.

Detailed product planning, marketing and production management swelled in importance for the entire industry.

1999 onward

Demand for the producing region's leading products, its staple crepe products, dropped sharply. With adjustments to production level insufficient, profitability deteriorated.

Today companies are making a concerted push to develop specialized fabrics. Gradually these efforts are yielding results, but the demands of apparel makers and retailers for high quality and quick response are stringent. Production and management have to be perfect, not just at the unprocessed-fabric stage but at the processed-fabric stage as well.

In our discussion of this category, we have referred to the book *Takashima Crepe ni Tsuite* ("Takashima Crepe"), with the understanding of the author, Shiro Takahashi of Takahashi Textiles Co., Ltd.

We would like to thank Mr. Takahashi for his kind cooperation.