

Kay Sekimacki and Family Traditions – Excerpts from Sekimachi’s Interview

Baizerman, Suzanne and Kay Sekimachi Stocksdale. “Oral history interview with Kay Sekimachi [Stocksdale], 2001 July 26–August 6.” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. 2001. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-kay-sekimachi-stocksdale-11768#transcript>.

Kay Sekimachi on her Childhood

“After coming back in 1930, we were living in Berkeley, and there was a Japanese community, a Japanese Buddhist church, and there was also a Methodist church. And we did go to Japanese school after classes, and there were other Japanese kids around.”

“[My parents] weren’t Americanized. But on the other hand, I don’t think there was too much in the way of Japanese culture. I think they were just too busy, my father, number one, trying to make a living. This was during the Depression. And I know my mother took in sewing. And anyway, it was, I think, a very hard time.”

“One loves to eat, and so I think about growing up eating Japanese food, which, of course, my mother was more familiar with in cooking. And in those days, there was a vendor who came around to the various Japanese houses, and it was always fun going out to see what the man would have. So my mother was able to buy tofu, and fresh fish, and daikon [Japanese radish], and all kinds of Japanese produce. And then there was also a Japanese grocery store run by Japanese around the corner, and so we were able to get groceries there.

And I do remember a few Japanese New Year’s feasts that we would have. And I just remember one time, my mother cooked a lobster and put it on her great big plate that she used for just the New Year banquet. And anyway, I remember things like that. And also, once a year, she would pull out her kori, which was like a suitcase that Japanese women would store their kimonos in, and she would pull it out mainly to air them. And so, we always looked forward to that, and it was a big treat to see her wedding kimono and her obis and her other kimonos that she brought over.

I also do remember, we did kind of celebrate Girls’ Day, which was a big thing in Japan. And we had a set of ohinasamas—I think that’s what they were called—and you had a tiered platform, like a little stage set that you set these dolls on. And on the top, you had the empress and the emperor and the courtiers. And anyway, I’m positive we did not have a full set, but we had some, and they were always sort of our treasures.”

“But I must say, the first few days [at the internment camp], I thought, when we had to stand in line at the mess hall for meals, and I really thought, gosh, are we going to survive, because nothing was organized. . . . [I]t was, I guess, sort of army meals, beans and hot dogs and stuff like that.”

Kay Sekimachi on her Woven Books

“The first series started way back in, I think about 1985 [1980]. And one of the first ones I did was called *Waves*. And again, that was because the British Craft Center was having an exhibition of miniature textiles, and I, let's see, I participated in many of their exhibitions. And maybe for the first one, I did the three-dimensional woven box, and I did a whole series after that of nesting boxes. And then, the split-ply twining came, and then another show came up, and I thought, well, what am I going to do for them?

I can't recall what actually triggered the woven books, but maybe I'm beginning to remember that a book was given to us that came from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and it was a reproduction of an old Japanese book, and it was *The Book of Butterflies*. And it was an accordion fold book, and when you stretched it out or opened it out, it spread to about twenty feet. And so I looked at it and I looked at it and thought, well, gee whiz, if I did a double weave, I could have two images, one on either side.

So I thought, okay, let's just give it a try. And so I tried a book of waves, and I still have that one, and it's in the show down at the Mingei [Mingei Museum of International Folk Art, San Diego, CA]. And then after that, I was looking at the work of Hokusai and Hiroshige. I've just started thinking about Japanese things or Japanese books and Japanese prints. And then I even remember that we had a little tiny miniature book, which was an accordion fold book, and it was *Prints of Hiroshige*. So the prints were just tiny, but that went way back to our childhood, so I pulled it out and looked at it.

And so the next book I did was called *100 Views of Fuji*, and it was just Mt. Fuji repeated all the way across the whole front and the back of the book.

. . . I actually painted the image of the waves onto the threads with acrylic paint. And then, Joy [Stocksdale, Kay's stepdaughter] had given me some transfer dyes, and so I thought, well, why don't I try the transfer dyes? The only thing is that you have to use part-synthetic material, and I wanted to use linen, because of the crispness of linen and the body that linen has. So I thought, well, I'll give it a try anyway.

So I made the warp, which was in 40/2 linen, and set at, I think, thirty threads to the inch, and so it was double—it would be sixty because of the two layers. But anyway, I painted my image on with the transfer dyes onto tracing paper, and then when the warp was ready, I just stretched it out across an ironing board, and then put paper under my first layer of warp threads. And then I took the image and my hot iron, and just pressed the dye onto the linen.

But I knew that I had to do something to make the dye adhere to the linen better than, well, I wanted it to take on linen, and I knew that I had to size the linen with something. So in some of my experiments, I have glued warp ends. Actually before cutting off the woven part of the warp, you can weave an inch or so and then weave in a stick, then a little more weaving beyond the

stick. The inch in front of the stick gets glued, so as not to fray; the woven piece is cut off, and the stick gets tied to the front beam. No knots are required, so you don't lose a lot of warp.

I had strips of material with glue on it, and I found that the dye just took much better on the glued part. So I made a glue wash. I sized my linen threads with glue and let that dry. It was kind of a slow process; it took many steps.”

Kay Sekimachi on her Paper Boxes

“[T]he paper boxes are more like origami, where I actually would take a square piece of paper and I would fold. And again, I would make a small model just to be sure it worked. Because when I'm doing a piece that's about twelve inches wide, I want to be sure that it's going to work.

[N]ow, I have only a few sheets [of paper] left. They were planned pretty carefully. I marked stitching lines on the paper, and then I actually stitched two layers of paper together on the sewing machine. Some of the stitch lines became fold lines. And then, on some, I would even reinforce the two layers with another piece of paper on the inside just to give it a little more body.”

[Interviewer: “Now, you mentioned origami. Is that something you learned as a child, or did you learn that—”]

“That's something that we did when we were growing up—origami. We just grew up with it. I think my mother probably just did it, and we just grew up knowing how to fold the crane, boxes, and hats.”