



# HAND PAPERMAKING

VOLUME 28, NUMBER 2

WINTER 2013





## Papermaking as Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan

PAUL DENHOED

*Iwano Ichibei (Preserver of Important Intangible Cultural Property for Echizen Hōsho-shi), removing debris from newly formed layer of pulp.*

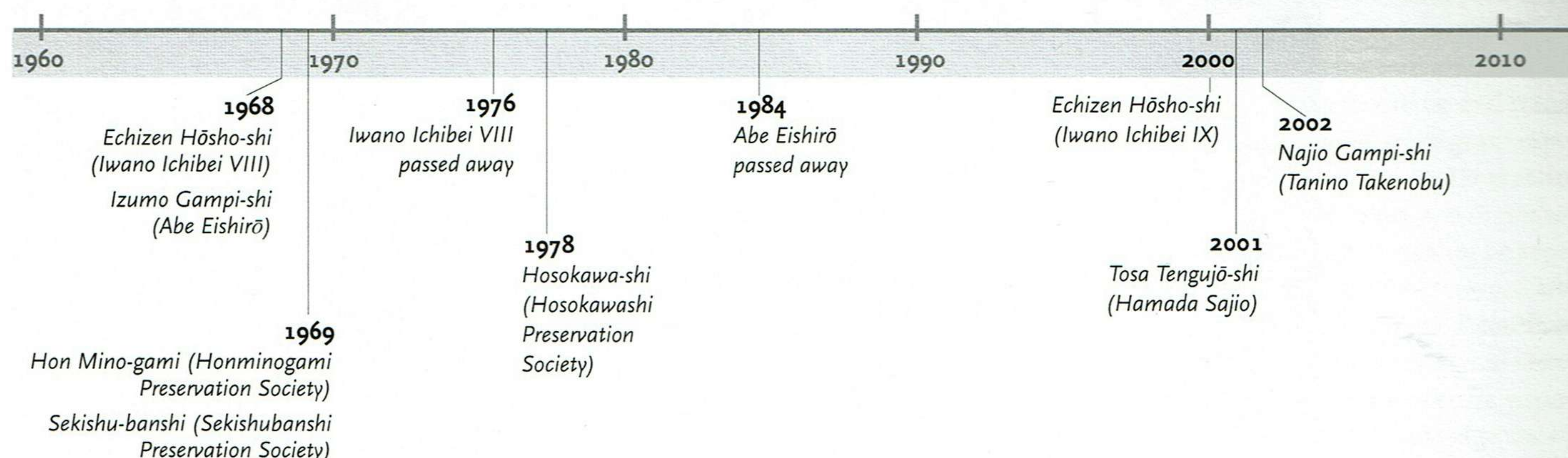
*Photo by and courtesy of Mina Takahashi, April 2006.*

The opening of Japan to international trade in the mid-nineteenth century, and the Meiji Restoration that closely followed, set off a period during which Japanese art and culture were devalued, and Western ways were being embraced. Not only were Japan's cultural treasures being whisked away to foreign collections, but traditional skills were also being tossed aside in the hand-over-fist adoption of new, Western techniques. In an effort to protect Japanese cultural heritage from the triple-threat of modernization, Westernization, and the opening of the world market, the Japanese government established the Ancient Temples and Shrines Preservation Law in 1897, and soon after, the National Treasures Preservation Law (1929). In 1949, a fire in one of Japan's oldest temples, Hōryū-ji, destroyed a highly valued set of mural paintings. This incident became the impetus for the establishment of a more expansive system for the protection of Japan's cultural properties, which were legally defined for the first time in the 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. That law has been amended and adjusted over the ensuing years, to develop into the current Protection System for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan, overseen by the Cultural Properties Department of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA), a section of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. In its current iteration, the law's stated objective is "to contribute to the realization of heart-enriching lives for the Japanese people through the comprehensive implementation of measures concerning the promotion of culture and the arts, with the fundamental policy of promoting the autonomous activities of people engaged in cultural and artistic affairs."<sup>1</sup>

The Cultural Properties (*bunkazai*) system is dizzyingly extensive and complex, with categories, subcategories, subdivisions, and other elements that make it nearly impossible to explain succinctly. Essentially, *bunkazai* are broadly divided into six categories: Tangible Cultural Properties, Intangible Cultural Properties, Folk Cultural Properties, Monuments, Cultural Landscapes, and Groups of Traditional Buildings. The following is a non-exhaustive list of some of the more meaningful rankings, configurations,



# TIMELINE OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL PROPERTIES IN PAPERMAKING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL



and permutations. Beyond the six categories of *bunkazai*, there are two additional, independent categories: Buried Cultural Properties, and Conservation Techniques for Cultural Properties. There are Intangible Cultural Properties, as well as more valuable Intangible Cultural Properties Requiring Documentation and Other Measures, and especially invaluable Important Intangible Cultural Properties (IICP). *Bunkazai* can be Designated, Registered, or Selected (which appears to dictate the type and degree of the government's support and involvement). Certification of the type of cultural property may be set at the municipal, prefectural, or national level (or any combination thereof), and certification of Intangible Cultural Properties can be given to Individuals, Collectives, or Preservation Groups.

The most widely known of the six categories are the Tangible and Intangible Cultural Properties. As described by the ACA, Tangible Cultural Properties (*yūkei bunkazai*) "denotes objects such as structures, paintings, sculptures, and works of craft. In contrast, Intangible Cultural Properties (*mukei bunkazai*) are performing arts, craft techniques, or other skills that are embodied and transmitted by specific individuals and groups. In other words, the fundamental difference between Intangible and Tangible Cultural Properties is that Intangible Cultural Properties are not the products of the techniques practiced by individuals or groups, but are skills, behaviors, and actions of people."<sup>2</sup> The popular term Living National Treasure (*ningen kokuhō*) is something of a misnomer that is in fact never used by the ACA, but adopted by the public at large to refer to individuals who hold the IICP. So colloquially, we say Iwano Ichibei IX is a Living National Treasure, but factually, he is a Preserver of Important Intangible Cultural Property. The property in question here—the thing that is being protected—is the knowledge and skill required to make the paper called Echizen Hōsho-shi. The ACA has chosen this Property as especially important, and provides financial and/or logistical support in order to ensure that the Preserver's skills remain at a high level, and to foster successors, such that the skills can be properly transmitted to the next generation. I have been told that one of the requirements for In-

tangible Cultural Properties—whether official or not—is that the Preserver must have a successor in place.<sup>3</sup>

All Cultural Property Protector papermakers with whom I spoke described a kind of pressure to live up to the honor. Certainly, the recognition of a Cultural Property is a source of pride, but the restrictions can also be something of burden. Recognized papers are usually steeped in tradition. Although the basics of hand papermaking have not changed much, there are always new innovations in technique and technology that allow papermakers to do less work to make more paper. Most papermakers are focused on making paper that sells—generally inexpensive papers that require as little painstaking handwork as possible. Cultural Property papers, however, must be made to the letter, by the traditional techniques. In most cases this means no imported (cheaper) raw materials, no powered scraping, no chemical bleaching, no highly caustic (but speedy) cooking, no skimping on *chiri-tori*, no machine beating, no extra-large sheet sizes (which allow a papermaker to make more square feet of sellable paper at a time), and no heated metal driers. All of these restrictions contribute to an expensive per-sheet price for consumers, and the vast majority of users are primarily concerned with the bottom line. One might assume that Cultural Property papers are immensely popular and widely used, but in some cases, the Cultural Property subsidy is the only thing that keeps that paper in production, and the Cultural Property label is the only thing that keeps customers buying it. Things are so tough right now for this industry, that even with recognition, it is difficult for some to continue on. Makers of good-quality tools are becoming more difficult to find (especially the traditional tools necessary to make traditional papers) and the quality of raw materials is declining and becoming inferior to materials available in the past. Not too long ago, I visited a papermaker, and when I asked to purchase some of the Cultural Property paper for which his studio is famous, he looked rather troubled and told me he wasn't sure he had any because he makes it so infrequently.

At the prefectural and municipal level, there is a multitude of Cultural Properties in papermaking.<sup>4</sup> At the national level, of the



108 IICP designated across all disciplines to 116 individuals and 26 groups, there are currently six papermaking-related IICP which are designated to three individuals and three groups.<sup>5</sup> The timeline that appears on page 14 illustrates events related to the papermaking world from the first designation in 1968 to the present. The name of the Cultural Property is followed by the name of the Preserver in parentheses. The designation ends with the death of the Preserver.

In all of its permutations, the Cultural Properties program helps to keep in place and prevent the disappearance of a variety of traditional Japanese papers. To illustrate the impact of the program, I have chosen three papers to share my impressions of how the program benefits the preservation of best practices in Japanese papermaking.

#### ECHIZEN HŌSHO-SHI

- Important Intangible Cultural Asset (National); conferred upon Iwano Ichibei VIII in 1968
- Important Intangible Cultural Asset (National); conferred upon Iwano Ichibei IX in 2000

In 1968, Iwano Ichibei VIII was one of the first two papermakers (along with Abe Eishirō) to be recognized as holders of an IICP. The Iwano family specializes in a particularly thick, soft, 100-percent kozo paper called Hōsho-shi. In 1976, Iwano VIII passed away. His son, Ichibei IX, endeavored to carry on faithfully as his father had, and in 2000, was also recognized as an IICP holder.

When visiting Iwano at his studio, there are two things he will likely express to you. First, with an earnestness that suggests something more than simple modesty, he will claim that he struggles to make paper that lives up to the example set by his ancestors, or to the expectations borne of an IICP paper. Second, he will extol the virtues of not cutting corners. His directives reflect the way that paper has been made in his family's studio for generations, and historically in studios across the country: use locally grown

fiber, don't cook your fiber with harsh alkali, hand beat, wherever possible don't use modern tools, don't hurry the pressing, dry on wooden boards, and be strict in your quality assessment of the finished paper. Follow the *best possible* practices, and don't be lured by speed or convenience at any turn!

#### IZUMO GAMPI-SHI

- Important Intangible Cultural Asset (National); conferred upon Abe Eishirō in 1968
- Intangible Cultural Asset (Prefectural); conferred upon Abe Shinichirō in 2000

Abe Eishirō was recognized as a holder of an IICP in 1968; Abe made a wide variety of papers, but the one for which he was recognized was Izumo Gampi-shi, which, because of the way the fiber is prepared before sheet formation, has a unique patina. Eishirō passed away in 1984. Today his family, led by his grandsons Shinichirō and Norimasa, carry on.

Shinichirō suggests that there was a sense of relief felt in the family that they had been successful in supporting Eishirō through to the end, without failure or disgrace. Further, he told me that today, no matter whether his many different papers and paper products sell or not, no matter the fate of the memorial hall built for Eishirō, he keenly feels the responsibility to continue to make Izumo Gampi-shi, and to pass its technique on to the next generation. He admits that he does not have to sell large quantities of Izumo Gampi-shi—which has a narrow range of applications—because his family also makes a variety of mitsumata and kozo papers for general use. He also explains that the profit margin is small with Izumo Gampi-shi because it requires three times as much time and effort than other papers to produce. Even though the Izumo Mingei-shi studio and the Abe name are recognized for excellence, they share the same economic predicament as most



Abe Shinichirō (center, Holder of Prefectural Intangible Cultural Asset for Izumo Gampi-shi), works with his mother Abe Kii (at right) and his brother Abe Norimasa (at left) to brush sheets of Izumo Gampi-shi onto wooden boards for drying. Photo by the author, March 2008.





Imai Hiroaki harvesting his kozo field.  
The locally-grown kozo will be used  
to produce Oguni-gami. Photo by the  
author, November 2010.

other papermakers—times are tough. He suggests that if a way is not found to encourage more users to incorporate traditionally made washi into their lives, even in some small way, it will not matter if he passes on those skills or not.

#### OGUNI-GAMI

- Intangible Cultural Asset Requiring Documentation (National); conferred upon the Oguni-gami Preservation Society in 1973
- Intangible Cultural Asset (Prefectural); conferred upon Oguni-gami Preservation Society in 1974

Imai Hiroaki runs the only remaining papermaking studio in Oguni, where there used to be a great many. Oguni is in the heart of snow country, and Oguni-gami reflects its simple, local origins, maintaining an almost primitive production method with humble tools and antiquated processes. Part of the “requirements” for making true Oguni-gami, is the inclusion of the step called *kangure* in which the freshly made post of paper is buried in snow, a kind of natural refrigerator, until sunny weather returns in early spring, when it is dug out and the sheets are separated and brushed on wooden boards that are set out on top of any remaining snow to dry (and be sun bleached in the bargain). Imai-san has told me that he feels that Oguni-gami is the paper that tests him most as a papermaker and that the skills he maintains as a result of making Oguni-gami can often be applied

to other papers he makes in his studio. He also said that he is thankful for the recognition because it *forces* him (no matter what other distractions or difficulties he may be facing, and even without specific orders for Oguni-gami) to make that paper—to follow through that process to the letter—which in turn preserves those techniques in him and keeps the process alive so that he can hand it down to the next generation.

The Cultural Properties program codifies and ensures the perpetuation of the traditional model of generational skill transfer. Despite its shortfalls and the somewhat limited number of papers it protects, the *bunkazai* program is extremely important to the continuation of washi.

#### NOTES

1. Agency for Cultural Affairs, Foundations for Cultural Administration (*undated English-language publication*).
2. Agency for Cultural Affairs, Intangible Cultural Heritage (*undated English-language publication*).
3. Conversation with Abe Shinichirō, March 22, 2008.
4. Due to the high number of Cultural Properties conferred at the prefectural and municipal level, and to the lack of a central listing for papermaking-related items alone, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many prefectural and municipal papermaking-related CP exist.
5. Cultural Properties Department, Cultural Properties for Future Generations (Tokyo: Agency For Cultural Affairs, 2011).