

## Boro the Art of Tattered Rags

Boro is an art form that has resonated with me from the first time I saw a sample. It has the dreams, hard times, and wear of all the generations that are layered in each garment, scrap, or blanket.

Boro is the Japanese word for rags. The technique developed in the far north of Japan in the Tohoku or “snow country” specifically the prefecture of Aomori. It was known for severe poverty and dirt poor farmers. Situated on the far northern tip of the main Japanese island of Honshu, it is a spit of land surrounded by ocean on three sides. It is bitterly cold in the winter with terrible winds and snow. These Boro garments, blankets, gloves, and slippers were used and worn for generations. Nothing was thrown away and every small bit of fabric was valuable. When a woman died, her most prized item was her “furoshiki” full of her scraps of fabric carefully washed, ironed, and sorted.

A furoshiki is a square piece of cloth the Japanese use to tie up their belongings in. When I was growing up in Japan, everyone carried several sizes of furoshiki to carry their purchases home in. We didn't need plastic bags ☺ Many sizes of furoshiki are available and many are works of art. I even have one framed on the wall in my house. Cotton and silk fabrics were forbidden to be used by the common people until the early 1800's. It wasn't until 1892 when the first railroad opened up trade from the south that cotton became readily available. Being so poor though, the farmers often bought used and tattered cotton garments and cloth. It was all they could afford. I find it ironic that I have purchased old kimono and obi scraps by weight and was quite excited to open up the bundle when I received it. It was like Christmas! I didn't find any scrap that I thought I didn't need or could use somehow. I can just imagine a Japanese farmer's wife purchasing a bundle like mine and having the same feelings. If you purchased a kit from me, some of those scraps were from the bundle I bought. ☺ They found value in what everyone else saw as useless rags.

Even if cotton had been allowed, it would not have been a crop that could be grown that far north. The only fiber that the farmers had available to them was hemp. Hemp is not warm or soft and is a very labor intensive cloth to make. Everything from work clothes, blankets, and baby diapers were made from hemp. If one layer was not enough, several layers were stitched together until the desired thickness was achieved. Some of the blankets that are shown in the Boro book weigh 14 kilos. That is over 30 lbs. Can you imagine your family sleeping all together

under one blanket that was that heavy? This is the beginning of Boro; an art form that grew out of necessity.

Boro has had a stigma of poverty and shame. It is only in the last few years that the art of Boro has become accepted and valued. No one wanted the embarrassing reminder of the poverty that was associated with Tohoku. What we see as a beautiful craft that arose out of necessity, they saw as shameful. Thankfully, the “tattered rags” of Aomori have become something to cherish and honor. It is said that very few of the actual Boro pieces survived not because they were discarded or thrown away but because they were all used up. A jacket became a vest. A vest became a smaller shirt. A smaller shirt became diapers. Diapers became rags. They were literally all used up!

This week we will honor the work and skill that the women (and some men) developed to keep their families warm and clothed much as we honor and value the quilts the pioneer women in America created. Think of the Gees Bend quilts. Faced with a need the women created something beautiful to fill that need.

## Supplies

There are not a whole lot of supplies needed to create a beautiful piece of Boro. Remember, the fabric was all old, used, and it doesn't matter if it matches or not. I challenge you to use a piece of fabric that you hold too valuable to use. What is it sitting there for except to be used and enjoyed. I go back to my stash each time I start a new Boro piece and make myself pull out a precious Japanese fabric and use it. Now I look forward to using that special piece of fabric instead of holding on to it. I create my pieces using indigo and Japanese fabrics but I have had students who have used fabrics that have meaning to them. For example, I had a student that loves bright colors and wanted to use bits of hand dyed fabrics she had been dyeing over many years. It was beautiful. This is your art, there is no right or wrong if it brings meaning to you! It is the process and the meaning behind Boro that I want you to appreciate.

### Base Fabric:

- Indigo fabric (or any fabric you like) I use a piece 22x26. This is not a hard and fast rule; once again, this is your piece so you can make it any size you would like.
- Cotton batting cut slightly larger than the indigo. (I like black batting but it is hard to find)
- Backing to finish the piece
- Bits and scraps of fabric for patches

- Shredded fibers for “wadding” that will look shredded
- Thread ( I like pearl cotton)
- Needles chenille sizes 24, 22, 20, 18 (I like Clover or Tulip brand)
- Thimble
- Sharp scissors
- Mistyfuse and Teflon sheets
- Iron
- Reading glasses if needed
- Chocolate! Because who doesn't need good chocolate.

## Prep work

The only prep you really need to do is getting your fabrics ready. I like to wash all my fabric because I want it to be soft. If it's old fabric, I wash it with the new. If it's new fabric, it will get rid of the sizing that the manufacturer puts on the fabric. Go through your stash and even old clothing that you don't wear anymore. You never know where you might find the perfect bit to finish your piece.

Gather up everything you need into your workspace, nothing is more frustrating than to have to stop the creative process to get something you need. My husband refers to this as “building my nest” 😊 I think it describes how I surround myself with my project items pretty well.

I also find that I need to turn off the world when I create, especially in the beginning. Turn off the T.V. put on some great music and SILENCE YOUR PHONE. The earth will not come to an end if you clear an hour or so to create! Sometimes I like total quiet and sometimes I need a little sound, it depends on how the last few days have gone. Once I get my piece started and I know where I am going on it, I let the world back in. 😊 I have quite a few dyeing, shibori, and general art technique DVDs that I like to put in as background while I create once I have gotten the initial work started.

## Resources

Boro Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan by Yukiko Koide & Kyoichi Tsuzuki. I found this book on Amazon and it was on back order. I received it in about a month. It is written in both Japanese and English.

Modern hand Stitching: My book with the stitches I use in stitching Boro. It is available from Artistic Artifacts or from me. If you order from me I will make sure to sign it for you if you want.

Needles: Tulip needles can be ordered from [artisticartifacts.com](http://artisticartifacts.com) along with many of the other items such as Mistyfuse, Teflon sheets, and scissors. This is a great resource and they work hard getting your order out quickly. Clover needles can be found at local quilt stores, I order mine by the case but I need quite a bit more than most people.

Thimbles: It took me 2 years to find the one that fit me. My favorite is from the Thimble Lady. I bought mine at a quilt show. You can find her online and maybe find a venue close to you. The other brand I use that has a similar shape is Roxxane's thimble. Many quilt shops carry them. They are not cheap but to me they are invaluable. Liz found one she likes at the Thimble lady in the shape of a ring. One of my students just used a strip of fabric around her finger. I think you will just have to do the trial and error thing until you find one that works for you.

Batting. I like to use black batting with Boro. I like to leave the edges unfinished and the white batting is pretty glaring at the edge of a Boro piece unless you cut it back quite a bit. It is getting harder to find. The big box stores carry a 40/60 poly/ cotton blend but I like at least an 80/20. I am including a piece in the kit along with fabrics and needles. I did find black batting at [e-quilter.com](http://e-quilter.com) and they have it in several sizes.

Valdani Threads: I get mine directly from the company but if you look online it will give you a store nearest you. They are beautiful and I like the variegated pearl cotton also.

Sashiko threads: Sashiko threads do not have a finish on them and are not as smooth as the pearl cotton we are familiar with. Many quilt stores carry Sashiko threads. Do a google search to find the store nearest you.

There are several sites that will give you more information on Boro. I just googled Japanese Indigo Boro and had quite a few hits. If you are like me you want as much information as possible and I love to look at photos. As Boro gains popularity more and more is written about it and I think several books are being written. If any of you come across any books or videos you want to share please do so.

## Getting Started

This is always an exciting time for me! I have a new project to begin and the possibilities are endless. I never know exactly how a new piece will turn out and most times it is very different than what I first envisioned. With a Boro piece, it is more so because there is no pattern, and no

real direction, just patching holes. I have learned to jump in and start and usually the direction takes care of itself.

Begin by layering your indigo piece over the batting. The batting is cut larger for several reasons. One, it allows you to roll up the piece with no edges hanging out if you choose to put it away for a while, or carry it with you to work on it. Second, it is basically your ironing surface so it will help protect your table from the irons heat. Third, as you layer and stitch, the whole piece shrinks and distorts a bit and it just gives you a bit of wiggle room.

As you look at your indigo fabric, imagine it is the fabric of a brand new garment. No wear, no holes, no fading, just a terrific new garment. I always try to imagine the feeling I had as a child when I got a new jacket and couldn't wait to wear it. It was exciting. Now comes the fun part, creating age and years of use.

Start by putting some of the scraps of wadding, threads, cheesecloth, anything that reminds you of the bits that might come out of a garment if it is torn. Think about that new jacket you wore and it caught on a nail and ripped. Oh no! It's not new anymore! What hangs out? This is what you are trying to recreate, everyday wear and tear.

The women of Aomori had very little fabric and it was a necessity to patch, but not a high priority to make it match and look pretty. There was no electricity so everything had to be done during daylight hours. If her husband or son came home from the fields with a tear, it had to be repaired quickly and in a way that would give it long lasting use. Think about that as you choose fabric, no agonizing over if this matches or does that go there. Just patch. The same goes for the stitching. It wasn't real straight and if you look close at any photo you will see the stitches aren't even either. I challenge you to NOT take out a stitch. It was meant to be there, even if it's crooked and uneven.

Sometimes it is hard for us to let go of all the trappings of pretty and matchy-matchy that we have been taught. Now layer your threads and wadding that you are using, cover it with a larger piece of fabric and then create slits that can be shredded. Think of this as your second "generation". How would a garment or blanket that is 40 years old look and feel? You might choose a brighter color patch just to give the illusion of a new piece on the old. Use odd shapes and put them on crooked instead of straight. I always like to remind myself of my son's clothes I had to patch. The holes were never in a convenient place. Very rarely was it a straight tear. Remember to fuse the bits down to hold everything in place as you go.

This is where you have to really let go of your control. Don't worry about whether this bit of fabric might work here or there later. Unlike a traditional fabric collage, Boro is layers and layers of patches and the idea is not to make it balanced or pretty but to give the illusion of years of wear and tear.

I stop adding patches here and start stitching. Stitch down all the “second generation” patches. Traditionally, the Japanese used only the running stitch, but I have added a few more stitches that I have found my students enjoy incorporating into their pieces. Once the stitching is completed, it is time to move on to the next generation.

For the third generation, add more bits here and there. You have the final say in how much you want to add. Stitch the bits down, and move on to another layer if you want to add more. I will go in here and cut more slits or use a toothbrush or even a small wire brush to scrub at the rips to give the illusion of more wear. If the patches look too new, scrub at those patches also. The idea is to make each layer show wear. My first layer will look quite a bit older than the last layer.

Add as many “generations” as you feel your piece needs. You might want to make a progression of pieces like I did. I have a simple one with less than 10 patches and I have one that is totally covered and the stitching is covering the whole piece and in some places even under the bits. I made a small needle case. Then I made a table runner. Now I’m working on a jean jacket with stitching and patches. There is no limit to the things you can create using the Boro technique!

Some pieces are finished quickly, others cry out for more. Listen to it and keep going until you feel it’s complete. I cannot emphasize enough that this is YOUR piece and it is done when you say it is done. There is no right or wrong.

Enjoy the process!