

# Gender and Needlecraft in Early Modern Japan

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Needlecraft defined the daily lives of men and women of all classes in early modern Japan (1550s-1850s). In addition to garments of all kinds-- bedding (*yogi*), cushion covers (*futon*), hand towels (*tenugui*), wrapping cloths (*furoshiki*), to name only the most obvious examples-- were all made by women as part of the domestic economy. Women also mended, quilted, and embroidered clothing and recycled scraps of fabric to form padded pictures known as *oshi-e*. Yet despite the esteem that Japanese textiles enjoy throughout the world today, domestic needlework is a constituent of Japan's craft traditions that has been the subject of relatively little scholarly attention. This marginalization reflects a failure, on the one hand, to recognize needlework as an important female accomplishment requiring creativity, purposeful design and technical skills and, on the other, to acknowledge the importance of the needle as a technology critical to the early modern economy. This paper explores domestic needlecraft through the eye of the needle, arguing that this tiny tool occupies a critical material and symbolic place at the intersection of female production and reproduction.

**Christine Guth** taught Asian design history at the Royal College of Art, London from 2007 to 2016. She has written widely about the visual and material culture of Japan in its transnational dimensions in publications including *Art, Tea and Industry: Masuda Takashi and the Mitsui Circle* (1993); *Longfellow's Tattoos: Tourism, Collecting and Japan* (2004); and *Hokusai's Great Wave: Biography of a Global Icon* (2015). Her current research project, "Making Things: Craft in Early Modern Japan," investigates the use of materials, processes of making, and the role of artifacts in social relations during a period that saw the dramatic rise in the consumption material goods across all social classes.

This talk is coordinated by Caroline Hirasawa (FLA) for ICC Research Unit "[Materialities of the Sacred](#)."