

Book Review

Material Choices: Refashioning Bast and Leaf Fibers in Asia and the Pacific

Roy W. Hamilton and B. Lynne Milgram, eds. 2008. Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles. Pp. 187, bibliography, index, copious color illustrations. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN-13 9780974872988.

Reviewed by E. N. Anderson¹

Reviewer Address: ¹Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside, Riverside, California 92521

Received: December 6th 2009

Published: August 3rd 2010

Volume 1:3

© 2010 Society of Ethnobiology

This work is the catalogue of an exhibition of East Asian and Micronesian textile art at the Fowler Museum, UCLA's large and excellent museum of ethnic arts. It is important and interesting to ethnobiologists because of its unique coverage of the textile plants of Asia and Oceania that provide the fibers. Plants involved include flax, hemp, various banana species, hibiscus, elm (bast from inner bark), lotus, and others. Decidedly the most exotic is *Curculigo latifolia*, used only by the Benuaq of Kalimantan. They produce spectacularly beautiful fabrics, but the industry almost died out a generation ago; it has been revived largely because of tourism and art collecting. Also specialized is the exquisite banana and hibiscus fiber art of Fais Island, Micronesia, a tiny speck with a population of some 300.

Other cultures treated in this volume include Hmong (Vietnam), Korea, In-tha (north Myanmar), Okinawa (the famous banana fiber there), interior Luzon peoples, and Japan including the Ainu. Several of the chapters are authored or coauthored by scholars from the countries in question. The level of scholarship and detail is high.

All these art traditions are extremely labor-intensive and specialized, and thus in danger of displacement in this world of cheap mass-produced textiles. The weavers show great dedication in continuing to work in the face of this. Some (notably in Japan) receive appropriate recognition, but others work for themselves and their communities, unrecognized by the wider world until now. Thus, a major part of the book concerns the efforts to preserve and maintain these arts in the face of imminent threats.

Yet the art presented in this book is world-class. Textiles in Europe have a lowly reputation and are sometimes unfairly dismissed as "mere craft," because the European world has long regarded sculpture and painting as the "fine" arts. However, in much of island

Asia, especially the small-scale societies of Indonesia and the Philippines, it is textiles that are the "fine" arts, while sculpture and painting receive decidedly lower status and aesthetic investment.

The results shown herein are amazing. Textile lovers will already be familiar with the beauty of Japanese and other mainstream textile art, but the work from the Benuaq and from Fais may come as a surprise, and, if so, prepare to be literally stunned. To anyone who appreciates abstract geometric art, any one of the photographs of the Benuaq pieces is worth the full price of this book.

Roy Hamilton deserves recognition as a powerful major figure in ethnobotanical art. His previous work *The Art of Rice* (2003) was a landmark—a truly great work of aesthetic anthropology. The present work is a unique contribution, apparently the first book to cover the bast traditions of East Asia and Oceania.

Reference Cited

Hamilton, Roy W. 2003. *The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia*. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles.