

PAPER, UPDATED

TRANSFORMING WASHI
TO MEET MODERN NEEDS



Wedding dress made from Minowashi

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WASHI is traditional handmade Japanese paper. In November 2014, under the single heading of “*washi*, handmade paper” three types of *washi*—Sekishubanshi from Shimane Prefecture, Hosokawashi from Saitama Prefecture and Honminoshi from Gifu Prefecture—were registered

on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Following registration of *washoku* (Japanese cuisine) in 2013, this is Japan’s twenty-second listing on UNESCO’S list. Meanwhile, a host of companies and organizations are developing products that transform *washi* to meet the needs of today’s market.

One such company is in Mino City, the production district of Honminoshi, where Keiko Ichihara operates Minoshimai, a gallery offering products made with *washi*. According to Ichihara, the fascination of *washi* is its thinness and uniformity. These characteristics make the paper light but durable, giving it a beautifully luminous glow when exposed to light. Moreover, though in general the *washi* production process involves only vertical swings when mixing the ingredients, *minowashi* (*washi* from Mino City) is created with vertical swings combined with horizontal swings, making the paper stronger because the pulp fibers are more intricately interwoven.

Ichihara’s *washi* products are receiving lots of attention, particularly her wedding dresses made of *washi*, which have been displayed at many fine galleries such as the Kobe Fashion Museum. Ichihara explains that by effectively using the characteristics of *washi*, it is possible to make dresses that are light, breathable, offer good heat retention and have an elegant appearance. And since *washi* is made of natural material, it can be used by people with various skin conditions and sensitivities, including atopic diathesis (atopy). For this reason, *washi* products also have potential medical applications.

Ichihara never planned on working with *washi* from the beginning. What proved to be her initial opportunity came in 1988 when she studied welfare in the U.S. at Oregon State University. Because *washi* is suitable for simple arts and crafts, she decided to use the paper in recreational activities for the elderly. To her surprise, the thirteen hundred years of history and the unique cultural place of *minowashi* attracted immense interest. That reaction and the powerful



Wedding dresses of washi are light, breathable and elegant

insistence of the school president led Ichihara to return to Japan to communicate and spread Japanese *washi* culture. In doing so, however, she did not work with *washi* in the ordinary forms of *origami* and stationery, but decided to explore its modern textile applications to have more people appreciate it.

Washi, however, cannot be used as cloth as is. So Ichihara, who had very little experience in the sciences and engineering, started from scratch and pushed through a continual process of trial and error to create a finishing agent that would overcome the weaknesses of *washi*. She explains that with this finishing agent, *washi* can become more hydrophilic on a molecular level and therefore absorb more water from air. This is crucial, because *washi* gains a smooth texture when it absorbs water, and when processed into a cloth in this way, it displays an exquisite, silk-like gloss. Unlike the usual resin coating finishing technology, her finishing agent does not emit any harmful gases when burned, and is therefore eco-friendly as well.



Keiko Ichihara developed a method to make clothing from *washi*



Other Ichihara creations made from *washi*

Ichihara explains that by developing *washi* products that cater to modern needs, she has been able to successfully spread an aspect of Japanese culture. Especially when holding *washi* wedding dress exhibitions overseas, many people are astonished by the handiness of *washi*, with its applications ranging from complex clothes to simple everyday necessities. They are equally impressed by the diversity of Japanese culture. Even in Japan, Ichihara receives regular feedback saying that her wedding dresses inspired them to become more interested in Japanese culture.

“I want more people to know about *washi*, and to communicate to people around the world the diversity and depth of Japanese traditional arts and crafts,” Ichihara says of her plans. With *washi*'s registration to UNESCO'S Intangible Cultural Heritage list boosting its momentum, there is hope that Japanese culture will attract even more widespread popularity in the future. **17**