

Scissors and Silhouettes

Elizabeta Suzuki came to Japan in 1972 to marry a Japanese man. Enchanted by the paper-cutting art she began in Japan, she honed her skills under her master, became one of the art’s unique exponents, and now performs to rapt audiences from around the world. Toshio Matsubara interviewed the artist.

K*amikiri* (paper cutting) is a Japanese performing art in which scissors are used to cut out silhouettes from a single, blank piece of paper in just a few minutes. It is mostly performed in a *yose* (traditional downtown comedy theater), where the performer talks as he or she cuts, making the audience laugh and taking their requests. A Swiss woman named Elizabeta Suzuki is gaining popularity today performing the art of *kamikiri* with music, dance and in multiple languages. Suzuki came to Japan in 1972 to marry a Japanese man she met in Italy. This

year the couple will celebrate their fortieth anniversary in Japan.

“*Kamikiri* is a one-chance combination of skill and ideas. The result is different every time,” Suzuki says. “I think that’s the greatest pleasure of this art.”

Switzerland also has a culture of cutting artistic shapes out of paper using a cutter, and Suzuki had always loved working with paper as a form of expression. Origami was the first target of her interest after coming to Japan, and she studied it for three years. She then immersed herself in *chigiri-e*, in which torn bits of



Cut paper artworks by Elizabeta Suzuki

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Elizabetha Suzuki at work on a *kamikiri* creation

moistened *washi* (Japanese paper) are used to shape forms with the help of glue and a toothpick. For this, she took lessons for five years.

Then she fell in love with *kamikiri*. She sought lessons from a master *kamikiri* performer, Imamaru Hayashiya, who was a friend of her husband. The master told her: “This skill isn’t something you can acquire with money. So I’ll teach it for free. But you have to promise that you’ll do it for life.”

In return for the master teaching her *kamikiri*, Suzuki taught him Italian and English, since he often performs overseas.

Suzuki practiced, painstakingly following the method of “learn by cutting” and imitating her master’s example. At the same time, she insisted on her initial desire to create her own works, such as animals and angels. Her master approved of her efforts and granted her the stage name Imaju Hayashiya in 1987, seven years into her training.

In the beginning, Suzuki accompanied her master on stage. Soon she developed her own unique style of performance, wearing traditional Swiss outfits and moving to music while cutting the paper.

“I still get nervous before performances,” Suzuki says. “That’s when I tell myself, ‘I love my audience! I’m going to have fun with them.’ Then I’m okay. The real excitement of *kamikiri* is all about the audience having fun.”

Suzuki performs at events such as parties at



embassies, expatriate wives’ gatherings, reception parties of international businesses and weddings. She has also performed overseas on many occasions. She is fluent in five languages—German, Italian, English, French and Japanese—and this is another skill that supports her efforts to perform *kamikiri* for audiences of different nationalities. People overseas are consistently amazed at her art, and never fail to give her huge rounds of cheerful applause.

“I’m living this very moment. That’s why I don’t think about tomorrow or yesterday. I live today, which is filled with dreams,” she says.

Elizabetha Suzuki’s *kamikiri* performance was indeed true to her words—happy and filled with dreams. HJ

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