

Aki Sogabi: A celebrated creator of kiri-e

By Judith van Praag

One of the artists featured at the International Examiner's ARTSetc celebration on November 5th, is Aki Sogabe, a celebrated creator of kiri-e (paper cut).

Her love for the delicate art form dates back to middle school in Japan, when she discovered a Chinese paper-cut illustration. Using small scissors and origami paper she copied the image. Later she took some classes at the Japanese Art Museum.

Over tea at the Panama Hotel, Sogabe told me how in Japan she worked at the National Institute of Genetics, "looking through a microscope at fruit flies," clearly a sign she had an eye for small detail, resulting in the ability to make miniscule, precise cuts. At that time she just made kiri-e as presents for relatives and friends. In 1978, after having followed her Japanese American husband Bill to the US, she was able to focus on her artwork.

And with great result. She's an award winning illustrator of at least seven published children's books among which "Aesop's Fox", for which she wrote the text as well. In "Kogi's Mysterious Journey", by Elizabeth Partridge, Sogabe's paper-cut waves splash off the page. Amazing what she can do with paper and cutter.

Her works are included in the Mitsubishi International Corporation of Tokyo and Seattle, the University of Oregon, the Oregon Public Art collection, and is on display in over 30 schools throughout Washington State. Take a look at www.akisogabe.com for upcoming workshops and lectures.

In 1998 the Seattle chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) together with individuals and other organizations placed a call for public art in Pike Place Market. Wanted was art

that would commemorate the 600 Japanese American farmers, who had made the market the best place to buy fresh produce; after the war fewer than 50 of them returned.

Out of the proposals by three finalists, Aki Sogabe's was chosen. Her design —depicting five nationalist scenes in the farmers' history— shows workers clear cutting, and breaking ground, working the land; selling produce in the market; wartime empty fields, backed by solemn Mount Rainier, and a lineup of returned Japanese Americans, among whom a saluting soldier. Sogabe's original kiri-e was enlarged —the installation in the market measures three by thirty-six feet long— and executed in enamel porcelain. Creating the hardy colored panels was a labor-intensive procedure, which ensured longevity. The dedication of the panels took place at noon on February 19, 1999.

In 2000, ARTWORKS invited thirteen artists of different cultural backgrounds to show their work, during a "Festál" millennium celebration at Seattle Center. After the presentation ended in May of 2000, Intiman Theatre purchased Sogabe's work: a grid, with twelve "windows". Three vertically placed aluminum panels on the right spell: "Year of 2000" in Japanese characters. Three randomly placed panels show cutouts of sherry blossoms. At the time of the installation, the blossoms stood out in a field of pink to white wash, but over time the paint in this piece has faded (the budget was low, and Sogabe used acrylics instead of a much more expensive car lacquer which would have withstood the elements).

Sogabe is well represented around Uwajimaya Village. The 6 by 30 feet glass donor dedication panel at Nikkei Manor (the retirement center), shows her "Cranes in Flight", the symbol for longevity. Since our meeting, I know the Uwajimaya Dragon tower was forged after her kiri-e design (there's no sign).

The Washington DC Ambassador Program, enables ambassadors to request work in the collection to be hung at their work place. Sogabe's portfolio includes photographs of Ambassador Katherine H. Peterson, stationed in Lesotho, Africa, posing in front of the artist's water theme paper-cuts.

With Princess Bear, her Akita dog at her feet, the artist works 5-6 hours per day in the downstairs studio of her home in Bellevue. Inspired by traditional paper cutting, Sogabe's style is distinctly her own. Instead of using a multitude of layered colored papers, she cuts her images with an Exacto knife out of regular charcoal (drawing) paper. Thus created "windows" are backed by pieces of hand colored "washi".

"I don't know why they call it rice paper here, it's not made with rice. There are three kinds of paper, 'koso' (mulberry), 'mitsumata' and 'ganpi'," she said.

In 2001 the Washington State Art Commission presented recipients of the WSAC Arts & Heritage Awards a print of Sogabe's work. And the Denise Louie Foundation used a limited edition of 12 prints for a fundraiser.

If you didn't have a chance to see Aki Sogabe's work during the Nordstrom Asian Pacific Heritage Month exhibition in May, make sure you check out her presentation at ARTetc

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