



Mingei 2025 An Art Retreat in Japan Report

It's early morning here in Arezzo. I'm having my first breakfast at home after more than a month in southern Japan. The windows are open to let the fresh air in. There's a beautiful full moon, a clear sky, and lots of swallows flying frantically. No other sound—just like in Kaho Alpe.

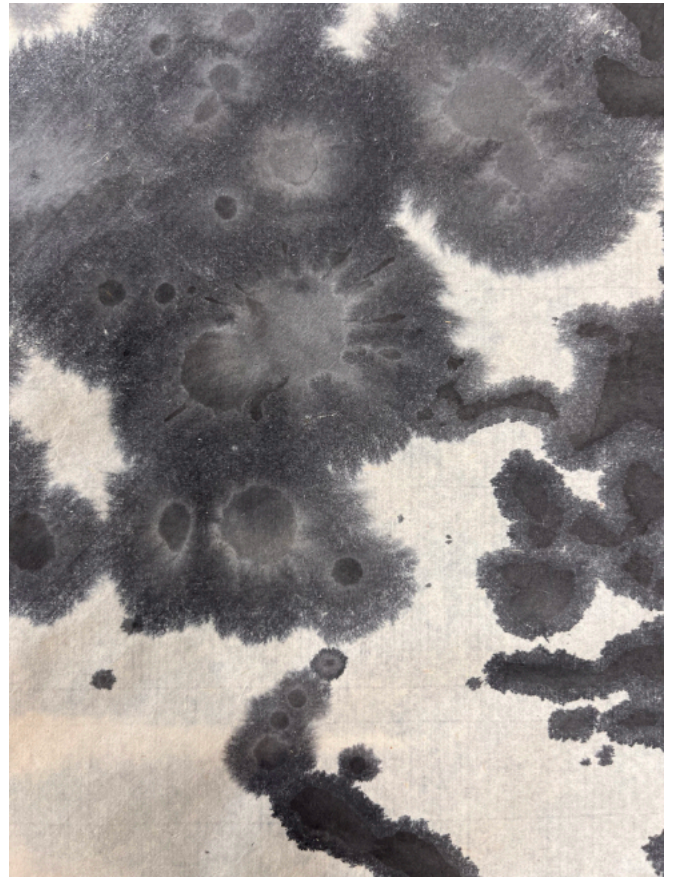
After two week-long workshops with 16 students in each group—coming from Australia, Belgium, California, Canada, England, Germany, Hawaii, Illinois, Italy, Japan, Michigan, and New Mexico—I'm now taking some rest and remembering the many special moments we shared.

Satsuki Hatsushima has done most of the on-site work this year, just as I did last year in Sansepolcro, Italy. All of this is possible because we share a long, beautiful friendship and deep trust. All those who participated now know how special these events are.

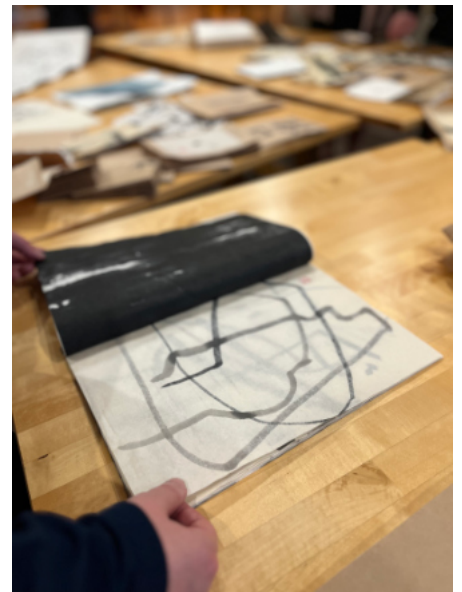
This year, we planned many opportunities for our students and the locals to meet: a pottery workshop, a papermaking workshop, taiko and cello performances, meals at a local pizza place, a fish restaurant, Seiryuan in Akizuki, a visit to a traditional Japanese garden, and more. At times, the classroom work seemed frequently interrupted, but in the second half of the week, both groups entered that productive frenzy where things unfold beyond imagination.

My role in these workshops is mostly to give general direction, offer stimuli to get marks on paper, and provide occasional individual support. The characteristics of washi paper

simply means “paper” in Japanese—I’m referring to kozo and other traditional calligraphy papers) offer a wide range of possibilities, allowing students to play and explore from the very beginning. We also used brown kraft paper, which became another medium for experimentation.



The final books were both individual narratives—lines and spaces progressively opening to the potential energy of composition—and collective narratives: abstract marks developed through shared exploration. In the end we all could perceive how marks spoke of each individual personality, we were seeing a kind of shared abstract language.





Some students were expert designers, bookbinders, calligraphers, illustrators, or book artists. All were given just paper, ink, and a few simple individual and group mark-making exercises to set the tone for the week. The use of wheat starch glue deepened the experience with washi, revealing a spectrum of contrasting sensations: paper can be soft, fluffy, velvety, rough, hard, glossy, smooth, sleek—contrasts that can tell countless stories.

On the final evening of the last workshop—which happened to consist entirely of female students—while drinking beer and sake at the local pizzeria, we realized how important and beautiful our connection with the local community had been, especially between the women in our groups and those in the area.

We made books inspired by Japan, but how did the local Japanese people perceive our abstract, mark-making books? I saw a couple of local women at the final show, slowly going through each book, page by page.

WASHI in YAME



On Monday, June 9, Satsuki, Yasuhiro (Satsuki's husband), and I visited Kayoko Matsuo, a papermaker from Yame. She introduced us to the son of Eiichi Takayama, whose father, Taichi Takayama, was the favorite papermaker of the artist Munakata Shiko (1903–1975). We bought some paper made by Eiichi Takayama over thirty years ago. Apparently, this paper is considered especially strong because the kozo fibers grow longer in that region.

According to Kayoko, the papermaking process involves using wood ash or natural alkali to soften the fibers. In the old days, she told us, they used to place the fibers under stones in the river and leave them to soften for days. Washi is handled like fabric and is sold by weight, rather than numbers.



After steaming the branches to loosen the bark, soaking and cooking the bark with wood ash, and cleaning and beating the fibers into a fine pulp, a quantity of pulp is placed in water with a natural dispersing agent called neri. It is then collected manually on a screen by gently and evenly shaking it. The sheet is pressed onto a surface and finally dried on a metal hot plate resembling a giant reversed iron. The side in contact with the hot iron becomes the smoother side of the sheet.

Nowadays requests are most often for white papers, which can only be obtained with the use of bleach, although bleach weakens the paper. Mizarashi, unbleached papers, have a yellow-creamy tone and are much stronger and long lasting, but are rarely produced today.



We looked at photos of Taichi Takayama with Munakata Shiko, including a beautiful letter that Shiko wrote featuring a drawing of a special knife used by Taichi. We also discussed the old uses of paper in Yame, including handmade tissue paper that was once produced for an exclusive brothel until the early 1950s.

At the end of the 1800s, there were about 1,800 papermakers along the Yabe River in Yame. Today, only a few remain, including Kayoko Matsuo and her husband. Their paper is primarily used for backing traditional scrolls.

It was a beautiful visit. Thank you, Kayoko—and thank you, Satsuki!