

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

*Experimental woven fabric made in 2002 by Christina Leitner using paper threads in the warp and black silk and paper in the weft. Photo: Christina Leitner, 2003. Courtesy of A&C Black Publishers, London. All other photos courtesy of Christina Leitner unless otherwise noted.*

*Experimental woven fabric made of 100% paper by Christina Leitner, 2008. She used three warps out of thin, machine-made white paper yarn, re-interpreting the old technique of velvet-weaving. Photo: Christina Leitner.*

*For this textile, Christina Leitner combines paper yarn and mohair to create an interesting contrast for this twill weave. Photo: Christina Leitner, 2002.*

## ON Christina Leitner

BEATRIX MAPALAGAMA

*I always keep my eyes and ears wide open to learn about people working with paper in extraordinary ways. In 2004 I had an artist working in my studio who was a student in the textile arts department in Upper Austria. She mentioned that a fellow student was writing a book about paper textiles. At first I did not consider paper as a textile, but after reading Christina Leitner's master thesis, my perspective has certainly changed. Leitner is an artist, author, teacher, activist in the field of paper textiles, and organizer of numerous textile activities. I recently spoke with her about her intensive investigation in the field of paper and paper textiles and her 2005 publication Paper Textiles.*

**Beatrix Mapalagama (BM):** Christina, you studied textile art, psychology, philosophy, and education. Why did paper become a fascinating medium for you?

**Christina Leitner (CL):** I discovered the textile side of paper for my work on the loom. After seeing Finnish carpets made from paper yarn I was captivated by the material and the idea to use paper in this form. Consequently I was looking for paper yarn and started to use very thin, industrially processed paper yarn to make semitransparent fabrics. From the beginning I was fascinated by the corporeality and clarity of the structure that one can achieve with this material, along with its inimitable aesthetics.

Later I got to know the long tradition of paper textiles from Asia, which differ from the European in character. Again a totally new field opened up to me. On the one hand I was deeply impressed by the soft and elegant fabrics, and on the other hand by the strong cultural roots and religious meaning of paper textiles in Japan. A wonderful bridge to my studies in psychology and philosophy emerged and I synthesized the concepts in an extensive thesis project. After completion I was very pleased to be asked by the Swiss publisher Paul Haupt to document the research in a reference book and to add step-by-step projects to augment the cultural and historical information.

**BM** How are paper and textiles similar?

**CL** Paper and textiles have many similarities. They start from the same raw material: cellulose. The cellulose fibers are mingled in the sheet of paper



Embossed and painted kamiko bags from the workshop of Mashiko and Tadao Endo, a renowned Japanese couple who produce kamiko and shifu. Photo: Christina Leitner, 2000. Courtesy of A&C Black Publishers, London.



Stencil-painted Japanese shifu cloth from the beginning of the twentieth century. Both warp and weft are paper thread, a rare type of shifu called morojifu, difficult and expensive to make. Photo: Christina Leitner, 2000. Courtesy of A&C Black Publishers, London.



Weaving assistant at the loom making shifu in Deepak Shresta's workshop, Kathmandu, Nepal. Fabric is distributed by Gisela Progin in Switzerland. Photo: Gisela Progin, 1996. Courtesy of A&C Black Publishers, London.

and stabilize themselves in a structure closely related to felt. They are also similar in terms of usage. In recent decades many textiles were substituted by paper, like paper handkerchiefs, shopping bags, or disposable cloth. Besides their similarities, there are subtle differences. Paper and textiles speak a specific language and evoke particular associations. The result is an exciting tension between these mediums, which has held my interest for many years.

**BM** What are the main types of paper textiles?

**CL** Generally there are two kinds. The whole paper can be used and through a special treatment achieve textile attributes. These procedures are very old. Many cultures used reinforced and oiled paper as a textile, for example, as cloaks, floor coverings, or sails. Traces of these examples can still be found in parts of Asia, the Philippines, Korea, and Japan. Also, for thousands of years, bark raffia, known as tapa or amate, was used for clothing, wall and furniture coverings, as a surface to write on or draw on, or for ceremonial purposes. Much later in history, paper textiles started to be made from twisted paper threads, a technically demanding process. Woven paper textiles have a long history in Japan as well as in Europe.

**BM** In your book you focus on two types of paper textiles from Japan.

**CL** Yes. The *kamiko* process emerged in Japan as early as the tenth century. To make *kamiko*, sheets of paper are repeatedly crumpled and smoothed out again to soften it, then soaked in starchy plant juice to produce a water-repellent material reminiscent of textiles. Kimonos were often made from this cloth.

The second kind of Japanese paper textiles is woven paper thread—*shifu*—which is also made using a fascinating technique.

**BM** *Kamiko* is my favorite paper textile. I imagine it makes the wearer feel the character of paper well. Simple in shape and archaic in appearance it could be part of a modern performance, where sometimes works of art are carried around to broaden the mind and the human body.

**CL** Wearing *kamiko* requires a lot of attention and careful movements of the body so as not to harm the cloth. Records show that Japanese poets loved the pure beauty of these paper garments, which rustled when walking and gave their wearer a rather ungainly appearance. *Kamiko* especially suited the aesthetic lifestyle of Buddhist monks who made the paper clothes they wore during their two months of contemplation, then burned the worn paper at the end of their retreat in a ceremonial fire.

**BM** What do you imagine was the initial human intention, when, for the first time, paper was cut into fine strips, rolled, spun into threads, and woven into textiles?

**CL** In the sixteenth century, Japanese farmers were poor. To make cloth, peasants cut up the pages of old, obsolete account books. This original form of recycling soon developed into an independent art form, and within a short time *shifu* literally became cult objects in Japan. In line with the deep symbolic meaning of paper in the Japanese culture, these paper weavings were used to make ceremonial robes. In manufacturing their own *shifu*, samurai expressed their religious beliefs by writing their prayers onto the paper before transforming it into yarn and fabric in rituals lasting several months. While no longer legible, the writings remained present, imbuing the robes with an almost magical quality. Thus the original necessity of reusing old paper, and the associated poverty, resulted in the exact opposite: *shifu* became objects of exalted luxury. For several centuries, *shifu* robes were more sought after in elite circles than precious silk.

**BM** Are there comparable examples in European history?

**CL** The European history of paper textiles is not as long as Japan's, nevertheless their importance during the two world wars was greater than generally known. The European paper yarn was industrially processed, a wartime substitute for traditional textile material. Paper yarn was unpopular and vanished without a trace after the wars when other raw materials became

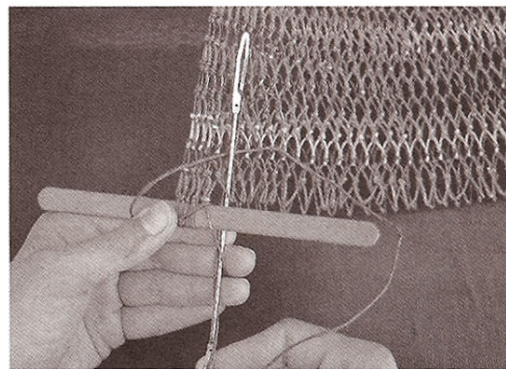
available again.

- BM** In Europe and in Japan the technology of producing paper textiles developed from a raw material shortage. How are paper textiles received nowadays?
- CL** Paper was rediscovered as a material for textiles approximately fifteen years ago. Paper's idiosyncratic beauty, flexibility, smoothness, corporeality, and the opportunity to recycle seem to match today's aesthetic and current way of thinking.
- BM** Which artists in the field of paper textiles today impress you the most?
- CL** Nowadays there is an amazing number of artists around the world who concern themselves with paper textiles in a variety of ways. Besides traditional Japanese *shifu* artists, there is Deepak Shresta in Nepal and Asao Shimura in the Philippines. Both manufacture *shifu* from their respective local papers, achieving new qualities in the fabrics. I am fascinated again and again by the range of qualities in paper textiles, and how well they mirror the character of the country of origin.

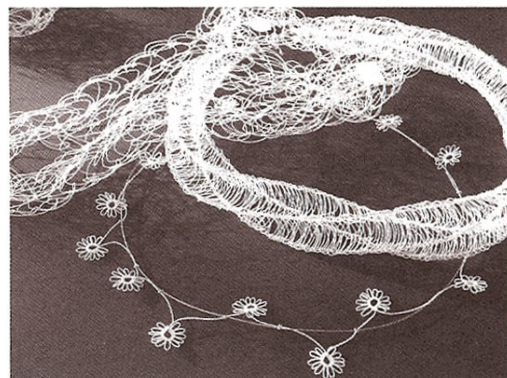
In Europe I personally admire the work of the Finnish artist Ritva Puotila, who is a pioneer in the field of paper textiles and sets aesthetic and technical standards with her company Woodnotes. Because of the comparatively long shortage of raw materials in Finland after the war, paper textiles were especially important in this densely wooded country. In Ritva Puotila's work, paper has shed its second-class status as a substitute, and emerged as a material with its own distinctive beauty.

May I ask you a question now? What experience did you take away from reading my book?

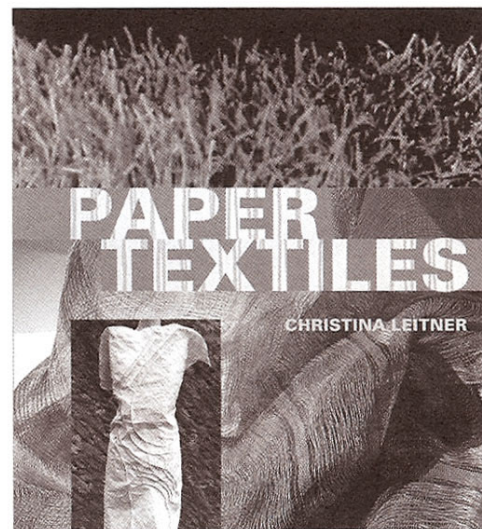
- BM** I was inspired by both the theoretical and the practical aspects of the book. By making paper thread using the instructions in your book, I discovered that it was possible to feel the distinct qualities of the different papers. Normally paper is planar. By contrast, paper thread is a line, so to speak, thereby expanding the formal possibilities in the work.
- Now a question for you: do you think you inherited your affinity to textiles?
- CL** I come from a traditional textile region in the northern part of Austria, in Haslach, a village of linen weavers. Even though my family had nothing to do with weaving, I believe that I was indirectly influenced by the surroundings.
- BM** What will occupy you in the near future?
- CL** Besides teaching weaving at the University Mozarteum in Salzburg and pursuing scientific projects at the Art University in Linz, I am currently working on establishing a textile museum as part of an education center that is being developed in my hometown of Haslach. Apart from its roots as a traditional weavers' village, Haslach has become a center for contemporary textile art. Each summer an international audience meets there for workshops, exhibitions, and lectures. For years I have helped to organize these events. Next year the conference of the European Textile Network (ETN) will be held at Haslach. And I look forward to teaching at your PapierWespe studio in 2010. All of these activities enrich my work and keep it exciting and varied. I am working with enthusiasm, but would be even more delighted to have more time for my own artistic works and further experimentation with paper textiles.
- BM** I imagine that many jobs you do in this field are volunteer and unpaid. What is your strongest motivation to work so intensively?
- CL** I have a strong passion for textiles in a broader sense. By seeing the world from a textile point of view, you become interested in the inner construction of things like the creation of structures, networking, or connection of torn threads. Within the textile world there are hidden elemental principles that are applicable to other areas of life. Through my projects, I have the opportunity to share these principles and make them more transparent and accessible to a wider audience.



Making a knotted net bag with paper yarn, a design project detailed by Christina Leitner in *Paper Textiles*. Photo: Christina Leitner, 2003. Courtesy of A&C Black Publishers, London.



Jewelry made by Christina Leitner in 2005. She used thin, machine-made white paper thread in a special plaiting technique and combined it with high-grade steel wire. Photo: Christina Leitner.



**PAPER TEXTILES**

Christina Leitner. London: A&C Black Publishers, 2005. Originally published in German (Bern, Switzerland: Haupt Verlag, 2005). 192 pages, hardcover, 10 ½ x 9 ½ x ¾ inches. Color photographs throughout. Includes glossary, bibliography, resource lists, and index. £30.