

FUROSHIKI

by Karen Nishida and Camillo Katsu

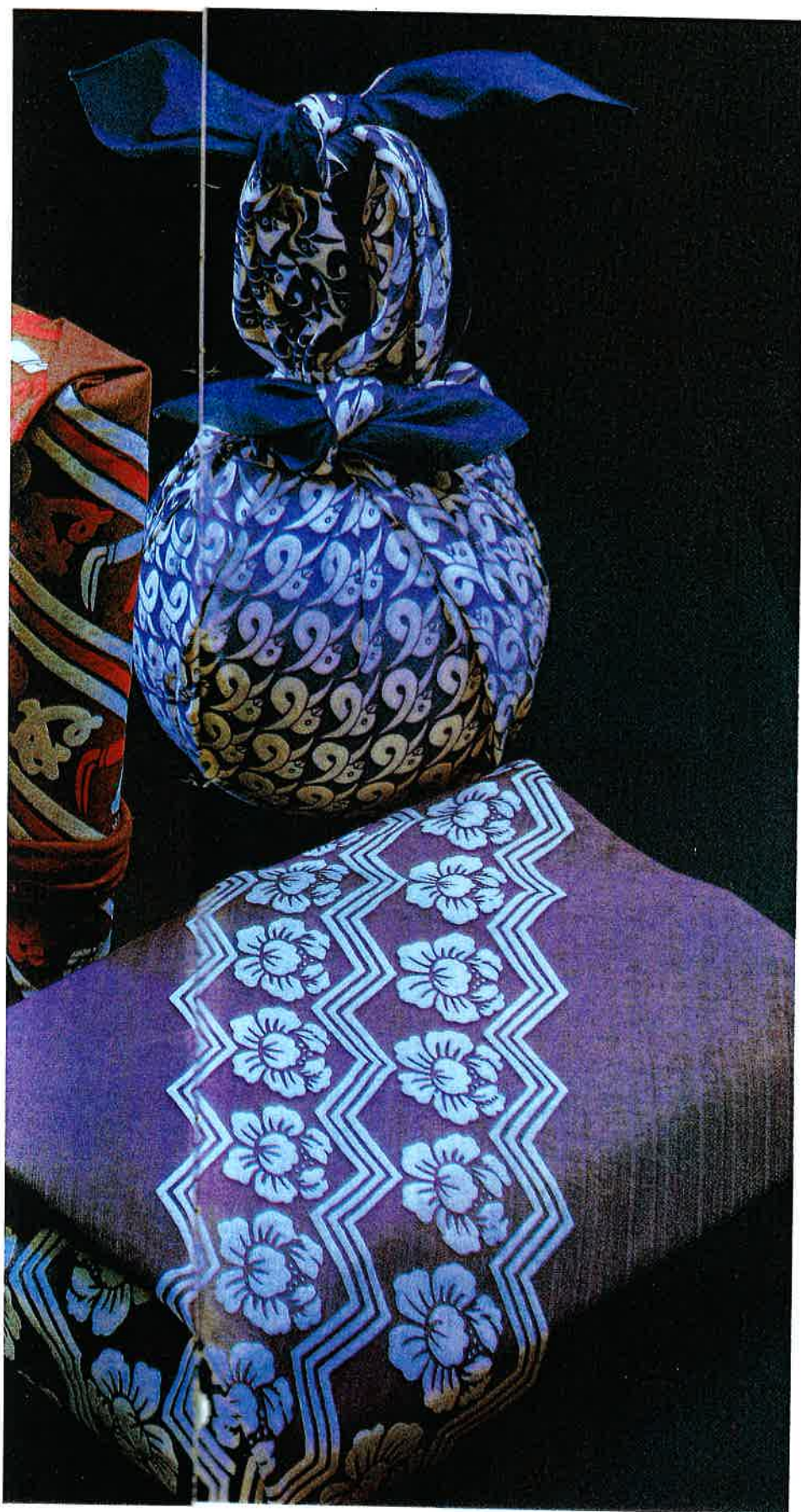
Now that the Japanese lifestyle has become so Westernized, *furoshiki*, the all purpose, cloth square carryall, seems to be giving way to the paper shopping bag. Although it is seldom carried today, it is most gratifying to see that *furoshiki* in all its elegance and beauty, continues to be used on highly formal occasions.

In the old days the square of cloth used to wrap things up was called *hirazutsumi*. During the early Edo Period, as the public bath, *o-furo*, was common to both men and women, they modestly entered clad in their underclothes. Each bather spread a *hirazutsumi* on the floor, much as a bath mat, and undressed on it. After bathing, they would wrap their wet underclothes and towels in the cloth to carry home. From this usage, the cloth became known as *furoshiki*, or bath spread.

The Japanese have always been extremely dexterous with their hands, and in time the simple actions involved in the folding, wrapping or tying the *furoshiki* evolved into part

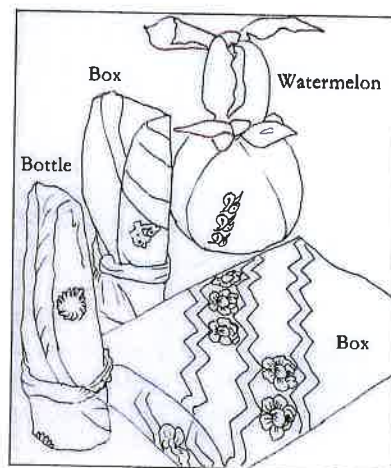


Photo by Miyai Furoshiki K.K.



and parcel of the Japanese culture. A characteristic peculiar to the Japanese is their abhorrence of carrying or storing things that are not covered. Even in the giving of money, regardless of how little the sum, it must be wrapped in a suitable manner before it can be presented. Gifts wrapped in attractive boxes tied with the appropriate colored cords to fit the occasion are always carefully wrapped, kept out of sight in a furoshiki before being presented. Neat and pleasant ways of packaging, the folding and stowing of the contents, are all done to please the eye, even after the boxes have been opened. A formal gift requires the closest attention to make sure that the container, wrapping and furoshiki fit the occasion for the gift they bear. This trait of evading directness, of keeping things under cover, could have evolved from the very social structure.

The versatility and convenience embodied in furoshiki are truly amazing in the manner they are employed for carrying purposes. Objects of all sizes and shapes, be they thin,



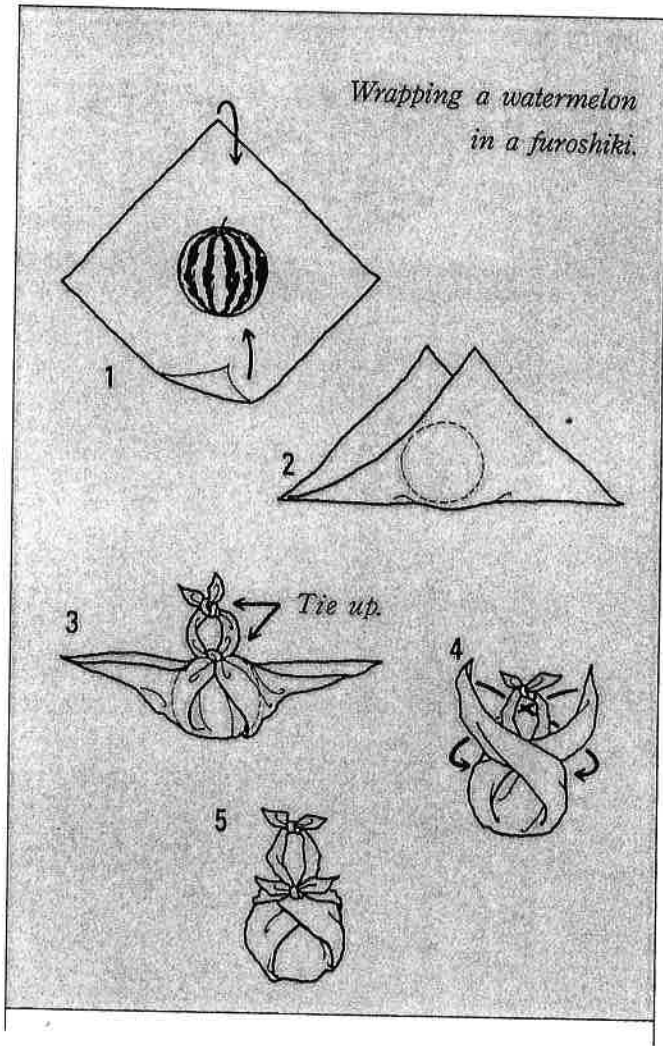
bulky, round, square or whatever, are easily accommodated in this piece of cloth which comes in a variety of sizes, but always in the familiar square shape. When not needed, it's simple to fold it up and tuck it into a handbag or pocket. Even today in the shadow of the modern buildings, an occasional salesman can be seen lugging his wares in a furoshiki with his company's trade name or marks printed in bold letters for all to see. Almost all Japanese cherish a memory or two of being summoned by their mother to greet a visitor in the living room and becoming all excited over the prospect of seeing what was in the furoshiki that the guest had brought.

In the early days, the useful furoshiki was only a hemp or cotton mat. As time went on, and as the Japanese social structure became more complex and varied, so did the furoshiki assume a more elegant and refined quality until the ultimate was produced in the beautiful and gorgeous commodity we see today.

In the Edo Period, the well-dressed aspired to be *iki*, smartly attired in an elegant manner.



*Wrapping a watermelon
in a furoshiki.*



The furoshiki reflects this attitude very well in retaining its original purpose and practicality while evolving into a fine ornamental piece. Part of the joy of unwrapping a present contained in furoshiki is that the design of the furoshiki is revealed in its entirety. Attractive in color and concept, it offers a visual treat.

The refined Japanese sense of color and all of the major trends of textile design are clearly stated in a study of furoshiki of the different eras. Masterpieces using the methods of Yuzen, Bingata, tie dying, drawn silk and other artistic approaches to executing design are still to be found today. It is always a delight to browse through a shop displaying its ware of furoshiki, to note the various designs, from traditional to modern abstracts, and in eye catching colors and tints, from the bright to the subdued. A surge of tenderness wells up in me as I enjoy the fresh beauty of these creations, and I am more than ever convinced that furoshiki is too good, too precious to be forgotten and excluded from this modern age. □