

Radiant Harmony:
The Art of Flower Wrapping

by Grace Lynnwood



Temari wrapping, tulips

Quiet and focused, Mitsuko Kawata has the presence of an artist, free-spirited as well as deeply knowledgeable and disciplined. Intimacy with flowers and forms of every kind nurture her spontaneous, versatile creativity. “Flower Wrapping” (*Hana Tsutsumi*), the distinctive style of presenting flowers she developed combining traditions of Japanese paper and paper folding with the beauty of flowers, incorporates a gift-giving aesthetic that goes back to ancient times. All ike-



(top) Sayo wrapping, foxtail millet
(above) Kaze wrapping, pansies

bana practitioners will enjoy the freshness and spontaneity of her works, and surely inspire their own work anew.

A LOVE OF FLOWERS

When asked about her first formal experience with ikebana, Kawata replies simply: “As a child I was somewhat sickly and weak and I loved flowers and make-believe games in the garden. I knew nothing about ikebana, but I would play with flowers and arrange them in my play. In my late teens, as I struggled in vain to arrange branches of a quince tree, my mother suggested that I learn ikebana.”

Fiercely independent, she shied away from the large ikebana schools. Her interest was not so much in classical principles, customary rules, or traditional aesthetics, which are part of a prospective bride’s and wife’s training in Japan, as in learning some basic techniques and following her natural artistic impulses. Looking for guidance that would give her the freedom to find her own way, she found a teacher at a little-known school and began lessons. “At my first lesson,” she recalls, “I did what the instructor told me to do, and it came out all very proper, but after the second lesson, I wouldn’t listen; I insisted on doing it my way. So, it wasn’t long before I fell behind the others. I did keep going and got my certificate, but much after everyone else.” She then started to arrange flowers in her own fashion and became fascinated with works focused on creative artistry.

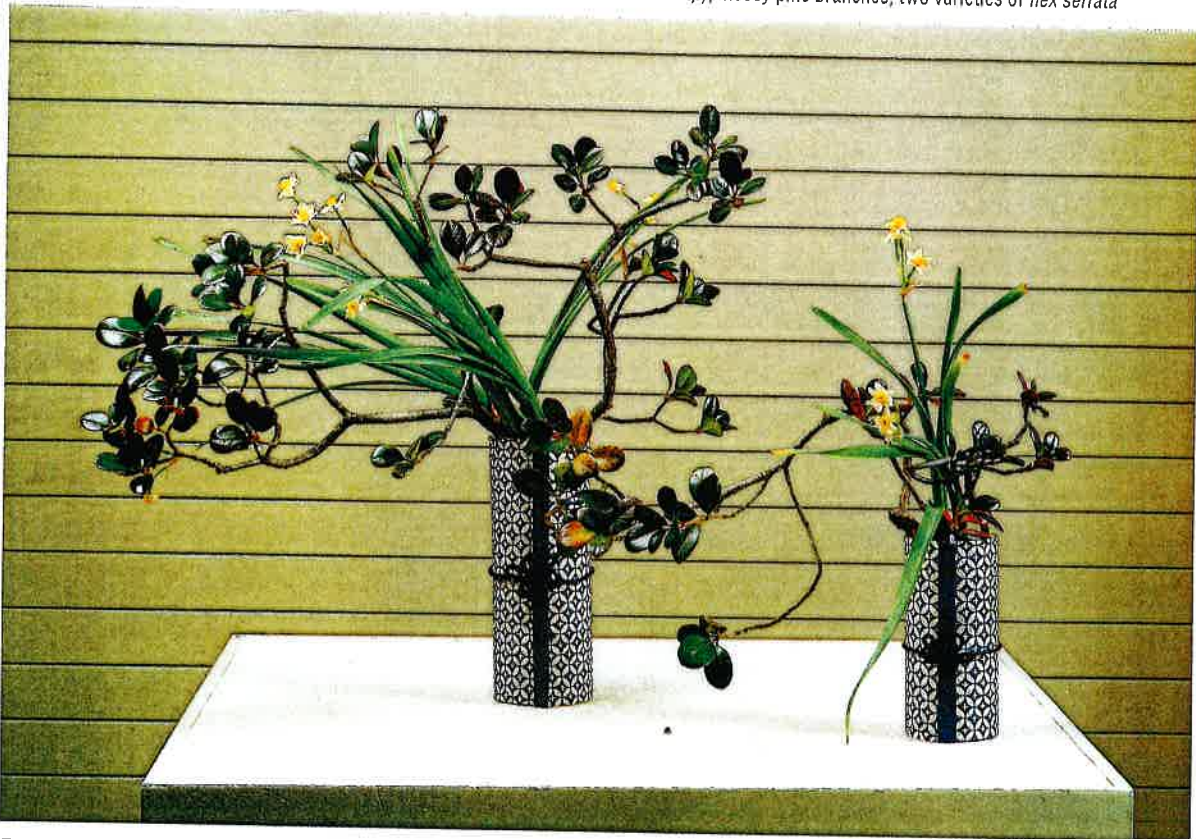
Her first work for public exhibit, done in her early twenties for a Kobo-



Kaze wrapping



*Nagisa wrapping (using the Heian period color combination known as Kurenai-momiji), mossy pine branches, two varieties of *Ilex serrata**



Tamaki wrapping, raphiolepis, narcissus

ten exhibit, was a jumbo-size “calligraphy brush” of pampas grass (*susuki*) made to reach nearly to the ceiling of the exhibit hall. Her next adventure, a series of works done three or four years for an annual exhibition held in a Tokyo department store, featured rape (*nanohana*) leaves placed in glass cases. “My mother had told me that smart people have lots and lots of wrinkles in their brains, so I imagined these crinkly, crepe-like leaves like the convolutions of the brain.” She found a farmer on the Miura Peninsula who had won awards for his *nanohana* fields and had him reserve part of it and grow the leaves large so that she could harvest the foliage.

PURSUIT OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

The landscape of Kawata’s childhood home near the shore of the Miura Peninsula formed the backdrop of her artistic sensibilities. Amid the striking contrasts of light and shadow extending over the black sand of its beaches, she collected shells, wave-smoothed pieces of glass, and other flotsam, arranging them in her own fashion. “The green edges of plate glass fascinated me, as did other hard-textured things.” In her twenties, she experimented with various media, using plate glass, balloons, and other materials in her pursuit of the art of sculptural forms.

As Kawata entered her early thirties, her contacts in the world of ikebana increased, and she did some innovative compositions for exhibitions, but never



Izutsu wrapping, dahlia



Tamaki wrapping, Chinese lantern lily, solidaster, Peruvian lily



Ikada wrapping, common zinnia



Rikyū wrapping, rose, loquat



Suehiro wrapping, calla lily, fennel

conventional arrangements in containers of water. “Then I thought to return to the more conventional style of ikebana, but without membership in any school. What I was trying to do forced me to think deeply about the truly difficult aspects of ikebana.”

Given the intimacy with flowers that had been part of her life from a young age, she sought a medium for her creative endeavors focused on the flowers themselves rather than the techniques. “In my experiments with *nanohana* leaves for the series of exhibitions, I realized that if I kept on using the same materials in the same way, I would end up simply a craftsman manipulating materials mainly by technique.” At this point, Kawata’s development as an artist entered a new phase.

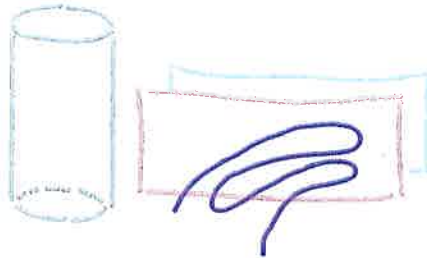
THE BIRTHDAY CHALLENGE

In her mid-thirties, Kawata became a student of Masanobu Kudo, an ikebana scholar and elder brother of one of the leading teachers of the Ohara School. He had just become independent. “The first project Kudo-*sensei* gave me was to create ikebana for a birthday party. A birthday party? What kind of floral expression would that involve, I wondered. Well, what about flowers themselves as a birthday present? A floral bouquet. But there would be no point in creating something that one can easily obtain from any florist shop.”

The challenge prompted Kawata to study the long history of ikebana for what it might reveal about the use

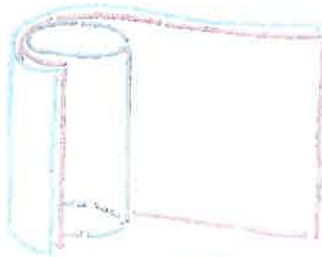
Tamaki Wrapping

The cylindrical *Tamaki* wrapping is very flexible and can be used in a wide range of sizes and colors. The instructions here are a basic model for your own variations and adventures.



1. Align two sheets of paper of different complementary colors back to back. Paper size: 15 x 38 cm (6 x 15 in). Cut a piece of thin braided twine or ribbon 2.5 times the length of the paper. Prepare a plastic water bottle or other cylinder about 6 cm (2 3/8 in) in diameter.

2. With the undersheet facing up, begin wrapping the container from the left.



3. Fold back the right edge of the paper by one-fourth the diameter of the cylinder.



4. Fold the edge back again by the same width as (3), so you have a double fold with the edge hidden in the crease.



5. Tie the braid or ribbon firmly in a bow or other decorative knot such as a "plum blossom" (*umeka*; also called a Five Petal) knot in the center, bring the ends of the braid/ribbon around and secure at the "back" of the paper cylinder.

of flowers as gifts. Her search revealed references to wrapping objects (*tsutsumi*) to present as gifts, and flowers were a major category, going back well into ancient times. She discovered in a Muromachi period (1333–1573) document called the *Sendensho* a passage on "giving gifts of flowers," which, although it did not give detailed instructions or directions, mentioned "*hana-tsutsumi*," the custom of wrapping gifts of flowers in decoratively folded white paper (*origata*). Paper was a precious item used mainly by the upper strata of society, and the tradition of using white paper as a demarcation of something pure or special goes back to antiquity.

Kawata's search also brought her to the descriptions by mid-Edo period encyclopedist and chronicler of samurai class customs Ise Teijo (Sadatake; 1715-1784) of the practice of wrapping gifts in folded paper. By the eighteenth century, paper was more widely available, and the accounts give detailed methods for folding paper for gifts and tying them with braided cords (*kumihimo*) or twined paper (*mizuhiki*). Ise Teijo's discussion of wrapping (*tsutsumi*) and fastening/knotting (*musubi*) traditions not only gave her ideas for her ikebana project for flowers as birthday gifts but new inspiration in her artistic search for a medium combining flowers and sculptural forms.

A CONTEMPORARY ANSWER

With the hints from Japan's traditions she found in old accounts, Kawata went

Mai wrapping, superb pink, *Neomarica northiana*



on to develop her ideas for creating ikebana arrangements decoratively wrapped in ways suitable for gifts, the versatile, decorative and expressive techniques now known as *Hana Tsutsumi*, “Flower Wrapping.” “But,” she says, “wrapping alone was not the answer. I am an ikebana person, and I wanted to work with three-dimensional forms. I did not want to just wrap flowers, but to include a water-containing vessel in the wrapping that would sustain the ikebana. I experimented with all kinds of materials and shapes—creating vessels of various forms in bamboo, glass, copper, stainless steel, and so on.”

In her early attempts to develop her flower-wrapping techniques, Kawata was often thrown back upon her own resources. Masanobu Kudo, her teacher, provided some reference materials, but when she attempted to fold paper as indicated she often found the information incomplete and inadequate and had only limited success.



Tasaki wrapping, amaryllis, lilac, lace flower

“A certain school had practiced flower wrapping, but each flower was associated with a given folding technique, and I felt it was rather narrow and impractical. For today’s ikebana, with its eclectic use of flowers, such formality was of little value, and I wanted to vary the forms of folding and match the flowers to the folding design. And with the marvelous variety of paper available today, I could then match paper to the style of folding. That became the basis of *Hana Tsutsumi*.”



Temari wrapping, bell-flower, lace flower, allium, Star of Bethlehem

She started her Kirara Kai group at about this time. This was and remains an unaffiliated ikebana group, more a small society or salon than a “school,” and open to all regardless of other affiliations. It meets regularly to provide a venue for members to exchange ideas and creative impulses, but remains a very small, loosely organized group. “Schools are very important,” she says, “in maintaining tradition and the foundations of ikebana, and the Kirara Kai is not meant to

Inspired by *The Tale of Genji*

The Tale of Genji is not only important as being the world’s first novel, but it is rich with the color and imagery of 11th century imperial court life and culture. For artists it has been and remains a source of inspiration. The characters and themes have inspired me for some years, and the Kirara *Hana Tsutsumi* genre is ideal to express in color and form my impressions of this world of love and complex relationships from Japan’s distant past. Here are four arrangements expressing what I feel are the essences of four leading figures in the novel.

Fujitsubo: She was one of the favorite consorts of Emperor Kiritsubo, the protagonist’s father, because she resembled Hikaru Genji’s late mother, who was the emperor’s favorite consort while she lived. Genji hears of this resemblance, which leads to an affair when they were both still in their teens. She later became a Buddhist nun.

Murasaki no Ue: Taken in by Genji as a young girl and raised in his household. She is beautiful, sensitive, and highly intelligent and becomes his wife after reaching adulthood. She is much loved by Genji, but her position is precarious because she is of lower rank.

Rokujo Miyasudokoro: Another of Genji’s lovers. Though the equal of Murasaki no Ue in beauty, intellect and sensitivity, she is older than Genji, gifted, proud and of high rank and becomes jealous and bitter when Genji fails to marry her. Her vengeful spirit (while she lives) torments Genji’s first wife and continues to attack the other women in his life after she dies.

Oborozukiyo no Kimi: Genji's secret rendezvous with the lady, a lesser wife of his half-brother Emperor Suzaku (successor of Genji's father), elicits the ire of her older sister, the powerful principal wife of Genji's father. Genji is forced into exile.



Fujitsubo. *Nagisa* wrapping



Murasaki no Ue. *Rikyu* wrapping



Rokujo Miyasudokoro. *Yae* wrapping



Oborozukiyo no Kimi. *Miyabi* wrapping

Considering the fame of *The Tale of Genji*, it is surprising that so few people in Japan and abroad are familiar with its content (except through the distorted media of summaries, movies, and manga). A few points will help understanding.

- Today many feel that the novel is about the women of the author's world and that Hikaru Genji and the other male characters are only foils to present a novel about women to be read by women.
- Many aspects of the complex aristocratic society of the late Heian period remain unclear. What is clear is that it was very different from ours. Heian aristocratic society practiced a limited form of polygamy. The "wives" of a noble were ranked by a complex system. No English term fits this system, so one encounters such terms as "consort," "quasi-wife" and the like, none of which exactly describes the behavior and social relationships of the time.
- As with Romeo and Juliet (who were about 13 years old), the age of consent for Genji and his friends was quite young.



Chigusa wrapping, cosmos

compete with, but to complement school techniques and principles. I chose 'Kirara' for a number of reasons. The word has a clean, clear sound, even on the telephone. It conveys a sense of tradition and elegance, and it means something like 'soft radiance' or 'softly glowing' and is associated with the appearance of mica, a material of which I am very fond."

Over the past ten years, Kawata developed the potential of *Hana Tsutsumi* through the Kirara Kai, traveling around Japan, especially in Shikoku, to collect paper from different papermaking villages. The rich and still vigorous traditions of decorative papermaking provide a great diversity of materials. The paper folding methods used in arrangements are ones she developed personally, mainly in two types—flat folding that is expanded out to a three-dimensional form and three-dimensional folds used to hide a container. Each fold type can be varied greatly, and each expression is up to the practitioner. She has given each type a name: for example, *Akane* features a

reverse fold at the center front that lights up the wrapping with a bright, contrasting color; *Chigusa*, used for wrapping flowering plants, evokes the term "one thousand plants"; *Kifune* resembles the Japanese wooden boat, with both ends turned upwards like a boat's prow. Some of the names refer to the tying method featured in the wrapping*, as in the case of *Rikyu*, where the threads from one side of its graceful knot are left long, adding curving lines to the arrangement. The repertoire of Kirara wrapping techniques has now reached more than 20 and continues to grow.

Some of the folds pictured here are quite difficult and involve a good amount of practice, but *Tamaki* wrapping is easy to do and is extremely flexible. The principles of Japanese paper folding lend themselves to a wide variety of papers, colors, sizes, and applications. Even if traditional Japanese materials are not available, the techniques and aesthetic can be applied, and Kawata has demonstrated and taught *Hana Tsutsumi* overseas, in South Korea and Florida. Like the soft glow of mica, her work generates a quiet radiance, encouraging those who find inspiration in her aesthetic ideas. ☞

* Due to space limitations, the various tying and knotting techniques are not detailed in this article. Instructions are included in her book: *Japanese Flower Wrapping: The Beautiful Art of Hana Tsutsumi*; Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.; ISBN-13: 978-4-88996-197-3. and ISBN-10: 4-88996-197-6. Ms. Kawata is flexible about tying and states that ribbon or braid tied in a manner that complements the wrapping and flowers is sufficient.