

Fukusa

The art of ritual gift giving is an integral part of Japanese culture. Gifts are a form of social interchange and are often used in a formal capacity to express good will, gain attention or focus or to apologize for some real or imagined infraction of social rules. Fukusa are used in the most formal of situations, such as gifts to important people, between families considering marriages, gaining attention of high level public officials or ranking corporate executives. For formal gift giving, the gift giver goes to the office or residence of the recipient, or arranges to meet in a neutral location. The gift is placed on a table or tray and covered with a Fukusa. The recipient then enters the room and the reason for the visit and gift are obliquely discussed. The giver leaves, hopefully having conveyed his message or sentiment, and the recipient removes the Fukusa and sees the gift for the first time. Because the giver has left, the recipient doesn't need to worry about giving offense if the gift is not well received or if the purpose of the giver will not be met.

The Fukusa itself becomes part of the gift and conveys additional messages through the symbology of the design. Fukusa used as gift coverings are roughly square and made of hand woven silk with very traditional, thematic designs. The designs are usually 'auspicious' in that they are symbolic with meaning for particular occasions. For example, the mallet of luck for new undertakings, double cranes for weddings, pine trees or turtles for birthdays, etc. Therefore, the designs represented in Fukusa are tightly coupled with traditional Japanese ideals, sentiments and attitudes. The designs are woven into the fabric, hand painted (Yuzen technique) on the silk fabric or embroidered. Sometimes they are a combination of all three. They are lightly padded and have a silk backing, usually red or orange, and have tassels on each corner. Often, there will be an embroidered or painted family crest on the back – in case the recipient forgets who gave him the gift! Most often, Fukusa are returned to the giver with an appropriate reciprocal gift.

Historically, Fukusa were made by specialized weavers, Fukusa masters, who produced these hand woven pieces often to order for special occasions. The largest size of a Fukusa is around 75 - 85 cm maximum. The Fukusa weavers produce one-of-a-kind panels. The design elements are traditional symbols, but are infinitely varied in color, combination, size and style. Fukusa have always been expensive. They are specialty items produced by hand and are considered art. With the decline of all hand woven products in the modern age, these items are usually only available as used, vintage or antique.

The older, large Fukusa are becoming scarce. Modern Fukusa are used in the tea ceremony, another formal social ritual. These are small in size and are used to clean the tea items or act as coasters. Large gift coverings made by Fukusa 'masters' are VERY expensive today and available only in traditional specialty shops. Most modern Japanese families do not own a gift covering. Older Fukusa are often damaged through use, especially on the back, and antique examples of Fukusa art (over 100 years old) are more and more rare. These are a true piece of Japanese cultural history and have intrinsic value as fabric art through time.