The Tanaka Nao Collection of Dye Stencils from the Tohoku Region:
An Analysis of Their Distribution Based on Merchants’ Seals and Inscriptions

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This paper describes a study of the Tanaka Nao Collection, an archive of 6,418 dye stencils owned by a Kyoto dyestuffs retailer, the Tanaka Nao Senryoten. The stencils were collected by Tanaka Naosichi, the firm’s eighth-generation president, on trips to the Tohoku region. They are made of layers of rice paper, pasted together with persimmon tannin, into which a design has been cut using an edged tool so that, when rice-paste resist is applied to the cloth surface through the stencil, the areas covered with resist remain white after the dyeing process. In the Edo Period (1600-1868), stencil makers were concentrated in the villages of Shiroko and Jike, in what is now Suzuki City, Mie Prefecture, and their products were famed as “Ise stencils” and “Shiroko stencils.” They formed powerful monopolistic trade associations or kabanakama under the patronage of the ruling Tokugawa house and the Kishi house. These associations secured markets and supplied their wares to dyers throughout the country.

The stencils collected in the Tohoku region are of uncertain origin. As the first phase of this study, I decided to examine the merchants’ seals and inscriptions on the stencils and deduce from their routes of distribution when and where they were used.

They were a total of 2,611 merchants’ seals. The most common ones, in descending order, came from Ise, Akita, Kyoto, Edo (Tokyo), Echigo, and Aizu. Clearly, the stencil merchants of Ise-Shiroko went on peddling tours carrying Shiroko stencils. In response to demand in the districts they visited, they also purchased stocks from Kyoto and Edo-based stencil merchants and sold them locally, as demonstrated by the presence of seals from Kyoto and Edo. The seals from the Tohoku region – Aomori, Akita, Echigo, and Aizu – would have been applied by the local merchants who handled stencils brought from Shiroko. After studying the merchants’ seals, I concluded that the stencils in the Tanaka Nao Collection were used in the Aomori, Akita, Echigo, and Aizu districts.

Next, I examined the ink inscriptions and found 126 stencils bearing the names of Ise stencils merchants. By comparing these names with a register of stencil merchants’ associations, entitled "Tenpo 5-nen Kae" (Revision of 1834), I was able to determine which merchants had sales territories in the Tohoku region. Those whose seals were affixed to the wares did not necessarily make peddling tours themselves. It was probably the merchants whose names were written in ink who sold their stencils.
locally.

As for the dates, there was a group of ink inscriptions which suggested that distribution took place over a period from about 1848 to 1864. Some of the other stencils had been reinforced by the [shabari?] method, invented in 1921, which seems to place the end point of distribution roughly in the early 1920s.

The study also showed that dye stencils used in the Tohoku region were characterized by a high proportion of kasuri (splashed patterns) of geometrical type and urumigata ([blurred?] patterns), together with futegata (stencils used in applying the resist) that were made by the dyers themselves.

In the next phase of the study, I will focus on the stencil designs.