

Art in the Garden

Mottainai: The Fabric Of Life
Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan

Fall 2011



Mottainai: The Fabric of Life

Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan

This exhibition is part of the Art in the Garden series on this year's theme of "Living in Harmony with Nature." It features two superb private collections of simple Japanese folk textiles made by hand from foraged plant fibers and recycled rags in the spirit of frugality and *mottainai*.

Mottai (勿体) was originally a Buddhist term that referred to the "essence of things." Applied to everything in the physical universe, the word suggests that objects do not exist in isolation but are intrinsically linked to one another. *Nai* (無い) is a negation, so "mottainai" is an expression of sadness for the disrespect that is shown when any living or non-living entity is wasted. "Mottainai!" parents say, admonishing their children not to waste a grain of rice or a scrap of paper. In a land where natural resources have always been scarce, people have long

understood the importance of respecting the value of all things and of wasting nothing. It was the only way to survive in less affluent times.

In 2005, the late Nobel Prize winner Professor Wangari Maathai of Kenya visited Japan and learned of the concept of *mottainai*. As a lifelong environmentalist and the founder of the Green Movement in East Africa, Professor Maathai embraced *mottainai* enthusiastically, launching an international campaign to bring the attention of the whole world to this very old Japanese concept.

The garments in this exhibition represent the spirit of *mottainai*. Laboriously made by hand a century ago, they are poignant symbols of an ingenious people who knew how to make do with what little they had—and do so in a beautiful way. In the true

spirit of *mottainai*, the warmth and quiet intensity of these simple garments speak to us across time of a resilient people who have much to teach their own modern progeny, as well as the rest of the world today.

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SPONSORED BY:

James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation; Regional Arts & Culture Council and Work for Art; Wessinger Foundation; and Katherine and Mark Frandsen.



SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Kei Kawasaki of Kyoto, Japan and Stephen Szczepanek of Brooklyn, New York for sharing their remarkable collections and helping to keep the spirit of mottainai alive by bringing the special qualities of these fabrics to the attention of a busy material world.

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 All Photos: Jonathan Ley

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