



Kimono Craft

USING THE BEAUTIFUL FABRICS OF HER HOMETOWN MAOKO CARROLL CREATES ONE-OFF ACCESSORIES AND HOPES EACH FINDS ITS DESTINY.

WORDS Penny Harrison PICTURES Celeste Falfyn



Maoko Carroll sits on the floor of her living room surrounded by squares of fabric. There are pieces of silk kimonos in jewel-like hues; indigo cottons with rich inky tones; and the sturdy natural weave of sacks once used for straining sake.

When it comes to fabric, Maoko happily admits she could talk for hours. "Of course, growing up in Japan, I didn't appreciate the variety of fabrics and the different weaves from different districts. I was more interested in the western-style dressmaking," she said. "I now realise just how beautiful these fabrics are. The silks are made on a little island, called Oshima, where they use soil to dye the fabrics. And the indigos have been made from indigo leaves. Some of them are faded and worn now, as they were once Japanese workers' aprons, but there is a real beauty in that too."

With the delicate skill of an artist, Maoko pieces together fabrics in varying colours, textures and patterns to create exquisite one-off handbags, satchels, totes and library/shopping bags, which she sells at markets around Melbourne.

It's a skill she learnt from an early age, watching her mother sew clothing and knit jumpers in her home city of Yokohama, near Tokyo. "My mum knitted all my jumpers and dresses, so I grew up surrounded by old and new materials, colourful fabrics, threads and buttons," Maoko recalled. "I can still remember my first creation, when I was six; I sewed colourful little buttons around a little towel, like a doily.

"I have always liked to sew, or do knitting and craft. I find when my hands and fingers are busy, my mind is really calm."

Kangaroo Ground is a long way from Japan, where Maoko's parents still live, but she says she can feel her mother watching her as she sews, advising her on fabric selection and praising her fine stitches.

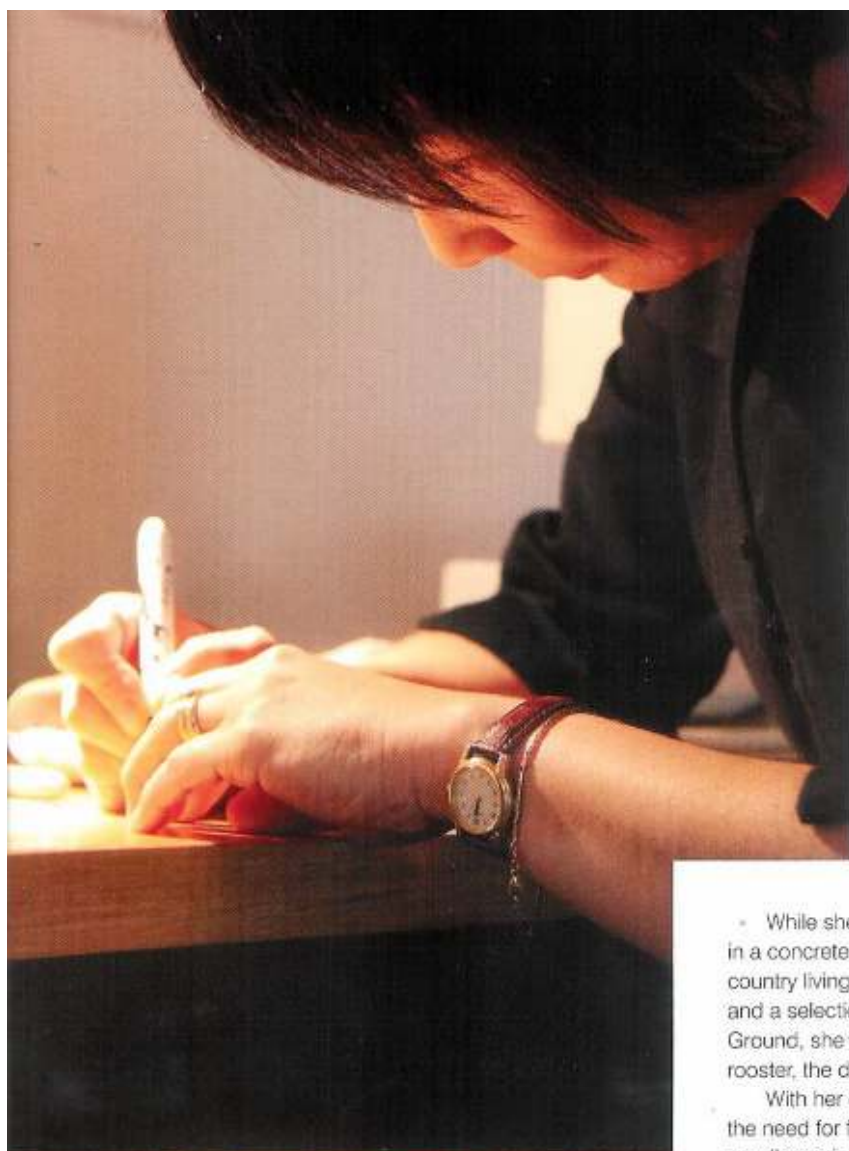
"With two young children (Nathan, 6, and Poppy, 4), I hadn't had the chance to sew for such a long time," she said. "But when I started again, it was such a shock. It was like I had gone back to my former self and all the memories, sounds and visions from my childhood came back and I could feel my Mum holding my hands from behind and helping me again."

Maoko explains that she ended up in Kangaroo Ground after meeting and marrying her Australian husband, James, in London. "We wanted our children to have a lot of space and nature, and an enchanted garden to run around in," she said.



THIS PAGE A pin cushion made by Maako's mother. Traditional indigo fabrics and old sake sacks are some favourite fabrics. Some of Maako's creations; Each handbag, made from vintage fabrics, is unique. OPPOSITE PAGE Maako spends hours creating each bag; A glorious range of fabrics includes vintage kimonos.





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While she confesses she is not an 'animal person', "I grew up in a concrete jungle," she said with a laugh. Maoko has embraced country living and is the proud owner of a jersey calf (Moo Moo) and a selection of hens and roosters. During her time at Kangaroo Ground, she has dealt with a mouse plague, an aggressive rooster, the death of a beloved cow, Sally, and road flooding.

With her children at the local primary school and kindergarten, the need for flexible working hours saw Maoko pick up her sewing needle again and she started to create her bags under the label Jamanapo, a lovely combination of letters from her family members' first names.

The bags, adorned with vintage buttons and buckles, and lined with complementary fabrics in quirky patterns, have been an instant success, and Maoko has had orders flowing in from market-goers and shops. While she is surprised and overwhelmed at the response, Maoko is also touched by the affinity buyers have for Japan.

"It has been lovely meeting all these people through markets," she said. "And I've found that everyone who has bought one of my bags has some connection with Japan, whether they visited there once or hosted an exchange student. So I feel like I am receiving the benefits of other Japanese people's goodness, and I am quite thankful for that."

But even though she has two eager helpers in her children, Maoko says production is slow. "It is very hard at the moment, because I spend so many hours working on each bag and I do everything, from sewing on buttons to writing swing tags," she said. "I do like to put so much effort into every bag though, thinking of its future owner."

With this in mind, Maoko includes on each of her bags a button engraved with her logo and sewn on with a red thread. "In Japan, we believe every child is born with a red thread tied around their pinky finger. Their other half in life has the other end of the red thread tied to their pinky finger. I use the red thread in the hope that my creations find their destined owners." VIEW