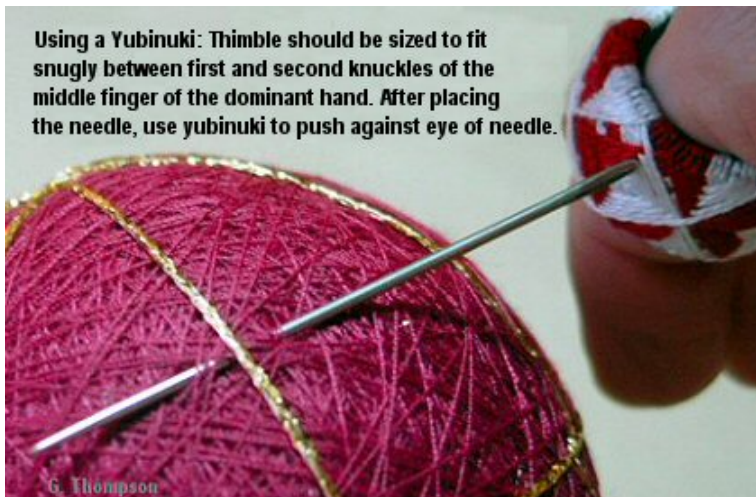




Yubinuki - Japanese Thimbles

Also known as "Thimble Rings" or, in Japan simply as "thimbles"

As we know, everything involved in Japanese life and culture has an aesthetic component to it.... it is believed that there is/should be beauty to be admired in everything. What nature provides it in the environment, it's to be found and admired. For man-made things, it's almost a requirement that it needs to be made considering aesthetics, as well as form and function. This concept of aesthetics prevails in everything, even the most simple items of everyday life. It is very rare to find anything that has not been created simply for function without considering form; to the Japanese this is what brings life pleasure, that beautiful things around you make the most mundane tasks of life more pleasant.



Using a Yubinuki: Thimble should be sized to fit snugly between first and second knuckles of the middle finger of the dominant hand. After placing the needle, use yubinuki to push against eye of needle.

The job or task of sewing, be in the most sheer fabric up to the heaviest leather, always used a thimble to protect the stitcher's fingers. However, much unlike the common "fingertip" thimbles found in the West, most Japanese thimbles are simple rings, about 1 cm in width, that are worn just above the knuckle of the middle finger.

The needle is guided into position using the fingers and fingertips, and then pushed through the layers with the Yubinuki taking the "brunt" of the force; the eye of the needle is pushed with using the protective ring on the middle finger. This prevented the maker's hands and fingers from injury and irritation from the eye of the needle. It also provided extra force - since it's much easier to push against something to move it, than to try to grasp on and pull.

Initially these thimbles were rather crudely made of scrap strips of fabric or leather - a few layers would be wrapped around a finger and a few stitches taken to hold it together.... but soon it became obvious that a thimble was a necessary item; they became an accepted and constant part of any stitching/sewing tradesman's tools, as well as being found in any lady's sewing essentials - be she aristocracy or laborer. And, of course - they rapidly transitioned from a "bright idea, spur of the moment, use what was available" item to one carefully thought out and crafted to contain that aesthetic beauty. (Today's quilters may be familiar with something available on the market that takes its design from this ancient concept - a ring of leather with a plastic "push pad". There are other commercially produced variations from metal, leather, plastic, etc. though none are aesthetically constructed like the handmade Japanese Yubinuki).

Yubinuki used for finer sewing and embroidery appeared first as fabric strips, several layers thick (thick enough to prevent the eye of the needle from penetrating), with some decorative stitching to hold it together in the appropriate size. They evolved into rings that were completely covered in decorative stitching, which also helped to provide extra protection against the needle's eye. Adding inner layers to the ring also added strength and durability. The inner layers of the ring might have a thin piece of leather, if it was available and the extra protection was needed; however, because of its strength, durability and ease of availability, washi paper became a common "ring base" with

a fabric covering, and then the outer surface is covered in decorative stitching (rather than as commonly thought, washi paper is not made of rice, but of very strong fibers from the mulberry bush/plant, and is extremely durable. Many household items in everyday life in Japan were and still are made of washi, in addition to it being used for decorative and artistic purposes). The beauty of the functional design- that of it being a ring worn in place as described, means that all of your fingertips remain uncovered so that no tactile sense or grasping ability in your fingertips is lost - it allows keeping full dexterity for stitching without punching holes in one's fingers from the eye of the needle. Even the most "die hard thimble haters" - thimble here being defined as that little plastic fingertip protector that completely covers the end of your finger - find Yubinuki comfortable, easy to use and most welcome. The only "caveat" is that it fits snugly enough to stay in place just above the middle knuckle of the middle finger, and that it does not slip and turn.

Modern day Yubinuki have taken on additional roles: they are indeed still used by stitchers in all embroidery disciplines as well as in tailoring, textile design and common sewing. However, because of their unique and colorful designs, you will also find them being worn as fashion statements - literally as fashion rings seated fully on any finger; larger ones worn as bangle bracelets; napkin rings at the table; any place an accessory in the form of a band or ring can be an option. As like many traditional crafts of Japan (which Yubinuki became), the old art was dying out and then found resurgence in more modern days. There are several websites that show them; in particular is that of [Yukiko Ohnishi](#). She has also released a book (much of it mirrored on the [website](#)) "Kinu ito de Kagaru Kagano Yubinuki" - roughly translated into English, it's "Yubinuki stitched with silk thread from around the Kanazawa area" (with thanks to Setsuko-san), which became available in March of 2006. In addition to her mastery of Yubinuki, she also has an overlapping interest in temari and other small textiles. You can find some other websites about Yubinuki listed in the Links page in the Resources section of TemariKai.com

Many gorgeous obi designs on Temari can be inspired from standard and intricate Yubinuki designs. My curiosity about these designs has been driven since seeing the thimble rings online and attempting my first temari using one - while it came out ok, I was still searching for more behind them. Being blessed with Yukiko-san's book as a gift deepened it all, since along with it came the advice that it would help much to learn about yubinuki and how to make them in order to get a good grip on applying the designs to temari obi pattens. Learning the Yubinuki process and understanding the designs was a wonderful winter's project. Many thimbles later, applying yubinuki designs to temari has become a wonderfully creative process, and the help gained from the thimbles indeed helped on temari obi. There are some basics such as number of sections, direction of stitching, number of layers, etc as well as the size and angle of the actual stitch that, if all are considered contribute to a smooth temari application. Be it thimble or temari obi, the edges of the band should be straight and even, the sections should all be even in size, and the stitching should completely cover the band area, as though it was a solid tapestry. It also created a new addiction... Yubinuki can become like beads or marbles - absolutely addicting; you can just sit and fiddle with them for hours. They also happen to be quite functional finger protectors, as has been described (and I have hated thimbles all of my life - I've been sewing and embroidering since I was six).



The basis for Yubinuki designs is that of zigzagging up and down, around the ring - much like a Chidori Kagari stitch, with the stitch being taken across the top edge of the thimble band, catching the thread similar to a buttonhole stitch. The ring itself (per Ohnishi's web and book) is constructed of a thin cardstock base (made to the finished inside diameter of the thimble) and then covered with a strip of bias fabric. This in turn is layered with a thin layer of batting (in Japan true silk batting is used). A strip of washi is then cut to fit the yubinuki base and divided into vertical sections depending on the Yubinuki pattern.

Depending on what the thimble is being used for, the inner band can be adjusted to be even more protective, although washi paper is very tough and durable while still being flexible and adds a solid layer of protection to the cardstock. It's

also a synergistic process - adding up all of the layers in the thimble (base ring, bias strip, washi paper and (most importantly), densely packed threads in the stitched pattern creates a very protective covering. I've tried and have not succeed in "poking through"... yet...



Yubinuki patterns are composed of varying numbers of vertical sections (koma), and stitching incorporates "skips" or "splits of the section" (tabi), to determine where the next stitch is placed in reference to the previous position within the koma (or next koma). These sets may in turn may be subdivided to create even finer patterns. Generally a thread will be started at one koma and worked around the ring to the starting point.

Patterns may have from 2 to many threads, with each thread being worked once around the ring to complete a pattern cycle. They may be stitched in one, or multiple layers; two to many colors of thread may be used, as well as using multiple needles of the same color thread. In addition, pattern outcomes are dependent on whether one is stitching "to the right" or "to the left" around the ring. As in temari, the actual stitch and thread placement varies according to the specific design and that is what is presented in individual pattern directions.

Consequently, they can range from very simple to deeply intricate. The actual stitch is similar to a modified buttonhole stitch, taken across the top and bottom edges of the constructed thimble base and forms a bound edge. The stitching will completely cover the ring base, and the stitching becomes the "working surface" of the finished thimble. The goal is to have perfectly even stitches in terms of size and tension, and have each koma fill evenly as the pattern is worked, so that all koma are filled with threads in the body of the ring, with an even row of stitches binding the edges of the thimble. The pattern threads interweave across the body of the thimble, forming a padded surface that is several threads deep in addition to the support and protection provided in the thimble base.

References: "*Kinu ito de Kagaru Kagano Yubinuki*"; translations thanks to Ai M., Tomiko W., Setsuko A.

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