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Japan House Los Angeles  
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# KUMIHIMO

The Art of  
Japanese  
Silk Braiding  
by

# DOMYO

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\*Complimentary



## DOMYO

EST 1652  
TOKYO

Traditional Japanese Braiding

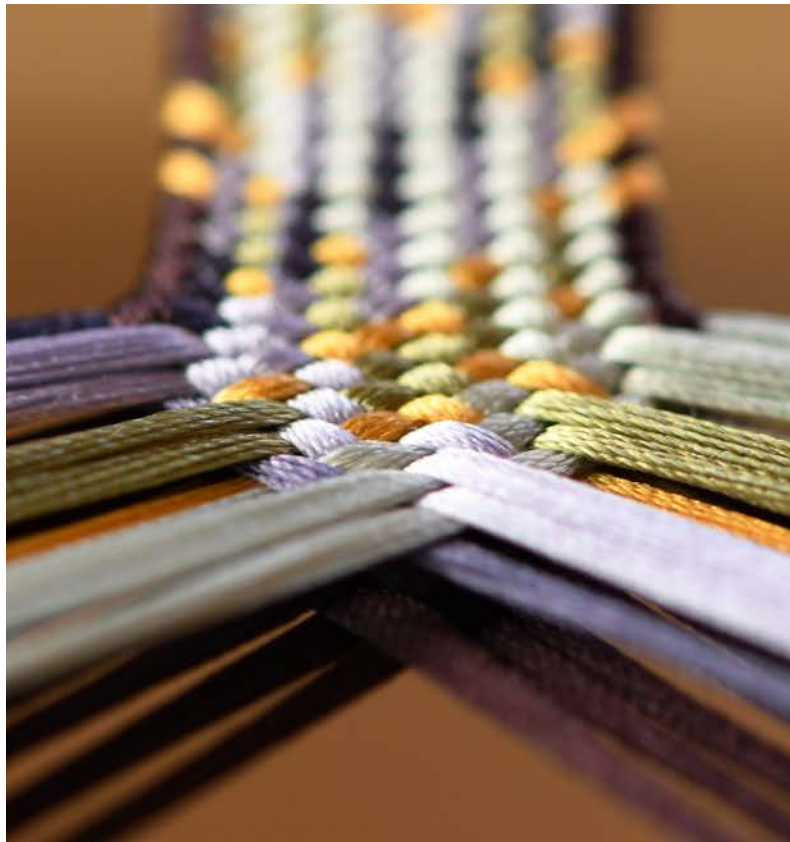
Photo by Yasuhide Kuge



# KUMIHIMO

## The Art of Japanese Silk Braiding by DOMYO

***KUMIHIMO: The Art of Japanese Silk Braiding by DOMYO* is the first exhibition in the United States to explore the history and art of Japanese silk braiding, or *kumihimo* (“braided cords”). The JAPAN HOUSE touring exhibition is produced by Yusoku Kumihimo Domyo (Domyo), a Tokyo-based company that has been making braided silk cords by hand since 1652.**



The tradition of *kumihimo* began in Japan in the sixth century in the Imperial Court and Buddhist temples, and by the ninth century, during the Heian period (794–1185), it reached its golden age. Braided silk cords of many styles and patterns were used for aristocratic costumes, interior furnishings and decorations, musical instruments, and religious equipment for temples and shrines. This historical survey presents the evolution of *kumihimo* over centuries in Japan. With materials provided by Domyo, the exhibition introduces some of the most important braiding techniques and tools and shows innovative ways *kumihimo* is used today.

### Part 1: The History of Kumihimo in Japan

The first section of the exhibition (in the JHLA sub-gallery) presents a historical overview of braiding in Japan. It includes information about the earliest evidence of simple braiding from ancient Japanese burial sites dating to the early Jōmon period, about five to six thousand years ago. Around the sixth century, complex braiding techniques and silk threads were introduced to Japan from the Asian continent. On display are replicas of silk braids from the Nara period (710–794) preserved in the Shōsōin imperial repository and the Hōryūji Buddhist temple in Nara. During the Heian period (794–1185), braiding techniques became more elaborate and silk-dyeing techniques advanced, ushering in a golden age of *kumihimo*.

In the Kamakura period (1185–1333), many new styles and techniques emerged to meet the needs of the powerful warrior classes—from wrapping sword handles to tying together the lacquered metal plates of samurai armor. Though the production of *kumihimo* declined during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it flourished again during the Edo period (1603–1868) as braids for carrying and wrapping the scabbards of swords, which at the time were mostly worn as status symbols and for ceremonies. In addition, silk cords became prominent elements of the kimono ensembles worn by women of different social classes.

Decorative bands called *objime* were tied over the *obi* to tighten it, and similar cords were used to hold objects such as medicine containers, tobacco pouches, and portable writing sets from the *obi*. Many new *kumihimo* braiding styles and patterns arose in response to the growing demand in thriving urban centers. On display are examples of these diversely patterned cords in ceremonial sword furniture and in clothing.

In the Meiji period (1868–1912), swords were prohibited and *kumihimo* production shifted primarily to *objime* worn with kimonos.

### Part 2: The Structure of Kumihimo

The second section of the exhibition, which occupies a large area of the main gallery, focuses on the structure of *kumihimo* braiding. The most important tools in *kumihimo* are the wooden

braiding stands, frames over which the strands of thread are laid during braiding. Large-scale *marudai* (“round stands”) and *takadai* (“tall stands”) strung with colorful silk strands and bobbins evoke the process of silk braiding. Videos, photographs, silk samples, and tools help visitors to learn about the structure of *kumihimo* braiding. Aspects of the *kumihimo* process include:

#### Silk Dyeing

Dyeing the silk yarn is the first step in making *kumihimo*. Each strand of thread is dyed one color at a time by Domyo craftspeople, allowing for depth of color and a rainbow of different combinations.

#### Braiding

Braiding is achieved by diagonally overlapping a set of silk threads that are tied off at one end and passed through the central hole in a round stand, or *marudai*, or the center of a tall, rectangular stand, or *takadai*. The threads are separated into groups of strands, each with a wooden bobbin attached to the end.

#### Shapes, Styles and Patterns

There are hundreds of ways to braid *kumihimo*, but there are two main styles: the wide, flat *hiragumi* style, braided using a *takadai*, and the rounder *kakugumi* style with a thicker cross section made with a *marudai*. The delicacy of the final product depends on the *temochi* (the number of strands of threads attached to each bobbin) and the quantity and size of the bobbins. By increasing the *temochi* and reducing the bobbin amount, braiding can be performed more quickly, but the finished cord will be larger and less refined—and vice versa. The patterns and designs braided into the cords are created by changing the number of colors and the *garaoki*, the order in which the threads are arranged.

### Part 3: The Future of Kumihimo

In the final section, the exhibition focuses on the ways in which braided silk cords are incorporated into contemporary fashion and design. The section includes works that highlight new *kumihimo* designs by Domyo, clothing reworked by garment modelist Akira Hasegawa that encompasses *kumihimo* braiding, and an installation by the UTokyo Tachi Lab at Tokyo University.

For over 350 years, Domyo has adapted to social and cultural changes and found new applications for their *kumihimo* products. Today, the company responds to and leads trends in fashion and continues to look for other markets for braided silk cords—including jewelry, neckties, and other accessories. In industry, traditional *kumihimo* techniques are being applied to braiding with carbon fiber and fiber-reinforced plastic (FRP).

Presented by JAPAN HOUSE Los Angeles

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