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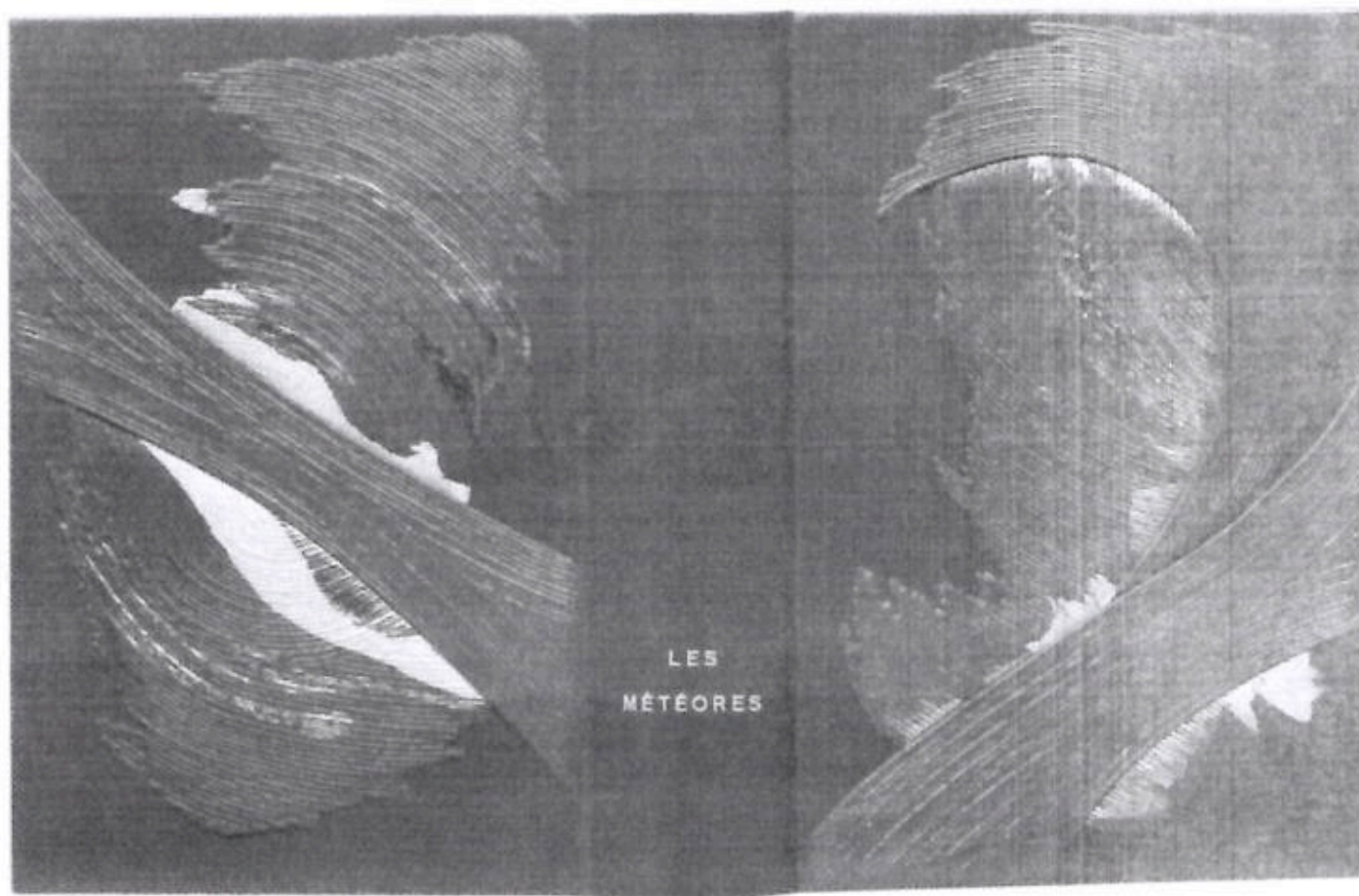


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Nobuko Kiyomiya: Judging a bookbinder in France by her covers

In the castle town of Angers, in France's Loire Valley, Nobuko Kiyomiya made a discovery nearly 25 years ago that would change her life. She had just divorced the man she married straight out of university in Japan and needed to start over "from zero," exhausted in mind and body from the painful breakup. She was studying French in Angers, with a view to becoming a translator, when she came across an unassuming workshop in an old building.

"It was a world without sound," she recalls. "There were five or six people working quietly in a darkish room, a truly silent world."

She began to visit regularly and before long, "it was as if I was being swept away into another universe — as if I was leaping into another dimension."

That new world was *reliure* — the storied practice of European bookbinding that in France is considered an art form. Rare first-edition or limited-edition books are taken apart and reassembled by a master who gives them a leather cover inspired by the literary work. Reliure has roots in French book-collecting traditions, in which the paper-bound copy of a volume, after a first reading, would be rebound in leather to be placed in the owner's library next to other handsomely fitted tomes.

ADVERTISING



Kiyomiya is keeping alive a way of thinking about books that may be finding itself under threat in our world of Kindles and 24-hour instant news.

"This is a thing you can feel with all five senses," she says. "It's not just something you see. You feel with your hands — the touch of the leather — and smell the old paper, the hide and the ink. And listen to the sound of the old pages turning over."

“Books are not just about obtaining information,” she continues. “They’re something you feel with your body. And so they are something that humans need.”

Today, Kiyomiya is one of France’s most esteemed practitioners of *reliure*, working from her apartment-atelier in Paris. Her work has been presented at the prestigious Salon du Livre, and she has a solo exhibition under her belt with a second scheduled for the fall. Yet the path to a new life — let alone such accolades — seemed far from certain in the years after she discovered French bookbinding in Angers. Struggles, hardships, even mental collapses ensued. What sustained her was the conviction that dawned soon after setting foot in the workshop for the first time — that in this “world without sound” she had found her vocation.

Kiyomiya told the master of the atelier that she did not want to learn *reliure* merely as a hobby, and entreated him to give her professional training. He agreed to take her in. After two years, she was ready to pursue her dream of opening a small *reliure* workshop in Tokyo — at the back of her family home — with a complete set of artisanal equipment she had hauled back from France. Her shop, *Kusa-no-hana*, attracted considerable attention, with write-ups in national newspapers, but the giddy times didn’t last. She just couldn’t make a business of it. In the four years she ran *Kusa-no-hana*, she received only 10 orders. The reason, she explains, was the difference in book-collecting culture in France and in Japan. If *reliure* can raise a book’s value in France, the opposite is true in Japan.

“In Japan, if you have a precious first edition and alter it through *reliure*, that first edition loses all of its value — it becomes zero once you’ve touched it,” she says.

“The depth of Japan’s book-collecting culture is a beautiful thing, but that also means the culture won’t change overnight. I realized it wouldn’t work out even if I tried a hundred years.”

She faced a choice: stay in Japan and teach bookbinding to hobbyists or return to France and try to make a living with her own creations. She moved to Paris to pursue her dream. The decision brought her great success, but also hardship and uncertainty, which continue to this day. At first she struggled even to bring food to the table. Then she had to battle with French bureaucracy, to win work and residency rights. From the third year, she nearly buckled under the strain of tax and social welfare payments. The anxiety of not knowing whether she would be able to pay the next month’s bills — rent, heating, electricity — caused sleepless nights. Every four months, the stress would cause her to break into high fever, and she would spend 10 days unable to get out of bed. That pattern of intense work, anxiety, then collapse lasted five years. Kiyomiya is on more secure footing today — in high demand and enjoying the esteem of the Paris literati — but still she lives in worry about a precarious lifestyle.

“Since I handle the entire process by myself and can’t mass-produce anything,” she says, “my livelihood is unstable.”

The succor of her everyday struggles is the daily return to her silent universe of bookbinding, crossing back into that “other dimension” she discovered in Angers, and navigating a world of imagination in which words slowly gather into form.

“First I read the book, and wait for the images that bubble up inside. Then I draw my first simple sketches, and from there begin to turn it into a concrete thing,” she says. “The most important part is to thoroughly read the text, and build up my own interpretation of the text. So when customers entrust their books to me, they are doing so with the knowledge it will be the way I have decided to bring that interpretation into existence.”

She seeks as much as possible to trust in the power of her imagination, avoiding the short-cuts to information made possible by the internet. In fact, she does not own a computer and shuns electronic devices, although she did buy an iPad two years ago — “Before that, I was really living in the 19th century.” Recalling the reliure for “Desert” by Nobel Prize-winning French author J.M.G. Le Clezio, she says she created “the desert that exists in my mind. So in that sense I don’t want to be buried in information.”

Such a way of working means she is at times compelled to turn down commissions: “It’s when the work just doesn’t fit my sensibility. There are occasions when I read the book and say, I just can’t do this.”

Kiyomiya takes comfort in stressful times from her “extremely possessive” Jack Russell terrier, Filou (“As long as he’s around, I’m going to have to resign myself to being single”) and her hobby playing the violin, which she took up before turning 50. She describes herself as “terrible” at the violin, but it helps her cope with the occasionally enslaving freedom of working from home.

“This kind of work, reliure, there’s no dividing line between life and work — and that can be good and bad. You can work while cooking, or in the middle of night, if it pleases you — and if you feel like saying I’m not working today, you can do that, too,” she says. “But at the same time, it’s hard to find the proper cut-off point, so I felt I needed to find some interest aside from bookbinding — and violin was perfect. It was something I wanted to do ever since I was a little girl.”

Profile

Name: Nobuko Kiyomiya

Profession: Bookbinder

Hometown: Saitama

Age: 55

Key moments in career:

1993 — Divorces

1994 — Discovers *reliure* in Angers, France

1996 — Returns to Japan and opens a studio

2000 — Moves to France

2006 — Holds her first exhibition

2017 — Second exhibition planned

Life philosophy: “I try to be true to myself.”

Things I miss about Japan: “The smell of soil, air, flowers brought along by the breeze of each season. Paris is too dry to feel these.”

Likes: Cooking (chicken stewed with peaches *en cocotte*)

Dislikes: Using any kind of electric

appliances. Showing up in social events to socialize.

● 清宮伸子

職業：ルリユール作家 (製本、装丁芸術家)

出身地：埼玉県

年齢：55

転機：

1993年 離婚

1994年 アンジェでルリユールと出会う

1996年 日本へ帰国。工房「草の花」を開業

2000年 渡仏

2006年 最初の個展を開催

2017年 2回目の個展を開催予定