

EMIKO SAWAMOTO— THE CROSS CULTURAL CONNECTION

by Lauri Copeland

With natural ability and a creative spark, Emiko Sawamoto clearly shines in the glass art community. When first introduced to her many years ago, I was immediately drawn by her warmth and engaging personality. Now that we are better acquainted, I also get a kick out of Emiko's mischievous side and playful sense of humor.

Emiko was born and raised in Japan. She moved to the United States in 1983 as a language instructor. A series of events eventually lead Emiko to a new path in glasswork. Her initial interest was in glassblowing. As she researched this medium, it became apparent to Emiko that setting up a studio for blown work would be difficult. In addition, the work was quite heavy and hot. She realized that this would not be practical for someone working alone. Exploring her options, Emiko discovered lampworked beadmaking in 1995. After completing a few classes and many, many hours dedicated to practice at the torch, a strong foundation was in place, and Emiko quickly made a name for herself. Her work was admired, becoming collectible early on.

Emiko's beads come to life with her use of bold colors and intricate designs. Gifted in sculptural forms, her signature pieces are easy to recognize. The *Maneki Neko*, or "beckoning cat," immediately comes to mind. With one paw raised, the traditional cat is a good luck charm, believed to bring prosperity in business. Also unique, the beads that Emiko creates are layers of multicolor glass ribbons that are wrapped around the bead to create precise, geometric patterns. The finished beads resemble Japanese Temari balls, which are traditionally made from delicately wound fibers. Other themes include Japanese dolls dressed in kimonos, busts that resemble Hollywood icons, and a series of lifelike miniature botanicals. Applying her keen sense of vision and finely tuned skills, Emiko says she makes "anything that comes to mind." We look forward to seeing what may come next.



Bringing Artists Together

There are many more aspects to Emiko's dedication to glass. She has been instrumental in bringing together Japanese and American lampworkers. During the 1996 Glass Arts Society (GAS) Conference held in Boston, Massachusetts, Emiko befriended a fellow beadmaker visiting from Japan. The following year, a couple of other participants made the trip from Japan to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the Society of Glass Beadmakers (SGB) annual conference.

The next step toward developing Japanese-American relationships among beadmakers was to organize a bead exhibition. The lines of communication were kept open through the use of faxes and phone calls, as Emiko did not have e-mail access at that time. Emiko made a proposal to the SGB board members requesting that a "Call For Entries" be placed in the *Bead Release*. Collected beads would be displayed in an All-Member Show at the GAS conference in Japan. Emiko went on to explain, "I wanted to make this a success. I personally invited beadmakers at the 1998 Best Bead Show in Tucson." While maintaining her own booth, she said, "I collected names of those interested and made reminder calls as the deadline neared. You know how beadmakers are. They need a reminder. Sometimes several reminders." In all, 103 lampworkers responded. Each artist could send up to three beads, resulting in close to 300 beads being collected. Emiko provided a description and weight for each piece, as required by customs forms. Certainly not an easy task!



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With input from Emiko, the Japanese beadmakers also have hosted several miniconferences. The first Festival was in 2000. It was a success with approximately 300 people in attendance. In addition, Loren Stump was invited to this first event to demonstrate while participating in the activities. Following this initial gathering, there have been several Japanese Festivals with more American glass artists involved. In turn, the International Society of Glass Beadmakers—ISGB evolved from SGB—continues to welcome a growing number of Japanese beadmakers to each annual Gathering. In December 2006, the fifth Japanese Festival was underway with 700 attending. Emiko has been awarded special honors for her many contributions. As a special gift, she was presented with an artist-made beckoning cat of porcelain. Congratulations, Emiko! Currently, this is the last of this particular festival until someone volunteers to coordinate another. Looking ahead, the Kobe Lampwork Museum staff are planning their second Bead Art Show and Festa to be held in Kobe during October 2007. Future gatherings are promising as Emiko maintains her active role as a translator and contact person.



Learning from Each Other

I asked Emiko how American beadmakers have influenced Japanese beadmakers. She commented that the Japanese now incorporate “more diverse styles.” Interest has grown beyond the usual round- or barrel-shaped bead. Also, there is a growing interest in working with borosilicate glass. Unfortunately, housing conditions make equipment upgrades somewhat of a challenge.

In turn, I see American beadmakers exploring the delicate designs used in Japanese beads. Several recent books have been well-received as they generously share techniques and information. Japanese-style torches and popular tools have also become available. As a result, many are working with the subtle color palettes found in Satake and Kinari glass. It appears that the exchange of information will continue to benefit us all in the years ahead.



There has been an explosive growth in the popularity of beadwork in the United States and in Japan. We are also enjoying a growing appreciation for artist-made, lampworked beads. Emiko travels back and forth to Japan once or twice a year. Her time is divided between her glass-related responsibilities and family visits. She says that time away from the torch during her travels isn't too difficult when the “timing is correct.” She looks forward to seeing her family and enjoying good food.

Here's wishing you continued success and safe travels, Emiko!

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There have been several articles that honor Emiko as the featured artist. These profiles are highlighted in the following publications:

“Bead Annual,” *Lapidary Journal*
October 2002
Bead and Button 10th Anniversary Special,
December 2003, Issue #58
Beadbugle.com
http://beadbugle.com/html/emiko_sawamoto.html
Beads of Glass by Cindy Jenkins,
2003

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