PRESS RELEASE

Lighter than Air
The Flight of the Dragonfly

30 October 2024 – 2 February 2025

Now the apricots and peaches are in bloom and the cherry trees will follow shortly. This always reminds us of the cherry blossom time we had the privilege to witness in Japan in 1924. We often speak of it and treasure the memories which we were able to enjoy under your admirable guidance and your expert knowledge of the country. I don't think it would have been possible for anyone to visit your country under such favourable conditions as we have done. We long for the time when we may meet again. Unfortunately, the war is dragging on and there is as yet no end of it in sight. But sometimes this comes sooner than expected.

Letter from Alfred Baur to Tomita Kumasaku, Pregny, 22 March 1943

One hundred years ago, in April 1924, while travelling in the Land of the Rising Sun during the cherry blossom season, Alfred Baur, an exceptional businessman and founder of the Museum of Far Eastern Art, discovered the ethereal poetry of the "images of the floating world" (*ukiyo-e*) associated with the landscapes created by the masters of woodcut prints and the delicate motifs that decorated the objects in his collection.

In keeping with his taste and pioneering spirit, and as part of the 160th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Switzerland and Japan, this exhibition reflects the aspirations to lightness that characterise Japanese culture, and which are found in the works of Uehara Michiko, a leading textile artist.

In the sub-tropical light of her native prefecture of Okinawa, an archipelago at the southern tip of Japan, her symbiotic relationship with natural fibres gives rise to sublime fabrics as fine as a dragonfly's wing, like "woven air", to use her term.

A pursuit and challenge not unlike that of explorer Bertrand Piccard, whose solar-powered aircraft – a giant carbon-fibre dragonfly that combines strength and lightness – threads a harmonious course between humanity, earth and sky.

Through the "woven air" of the Pacific, and in a world afflicted by wars, we may be confident that Alfred Baur would have celebrated, as we do, the virtuosity of the hand, the blossoming of cherry trees, and the free and agile flight of dragonflies…

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LONGING FOR LIGHTNESS

To live only for the moment, to give oneself over entirely to contemplation of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms, and the maple leaves [...], not to allow oneself to be weighed down by poverty, and not to let it show on one's face, but to drift like a gourd in the river: that is what is called ukiyo*.*
ASAI Ryōi (1612-1691), c. 1665

Uehara Michiko's quest for lightness and the variations in colour of her work are not unrelated to certain particularly bountiful sources of Japanese aesthetics: looking at her lustrous, moving fabrics, we are reminded of the images that, in the aristocratic Japan of the Heian period (794-1185), strove to convey the fleeting vivacity of earthly colours. For the scholar Tachibana no Narisue (?-1272), painting, fleeing from heaviness and immobility, can be considered a 'shimmering spectacle of the world' (*goshiki no shō* 五色之章), the fruit of the combination of the five colours (*goshiki*), referring in Chinese thought to the five constituent elements of the universe – wood, fire, earth, metal, water – from which everything arises and is transformed.
At the end of the medieval period, this poetics of lightness and transience reached its peak in the urban society of the Edo period (1603-1868). Originally associated in its Buddhist meaning with the sufferings of the human condition in the face of a precarious and illusory reality, the term *ukiyo* ('floating' *uki* 浮 / 'world' *yo* 世) came, through the flowering of woodblock prints, to celebrate the benefits of these mirages and our ability to delight in the fashions and attractions of the moment. Among the generations of artists who would fascinate Alfred Baur and all the lovers of Japanese culture in the West, Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770), a pioneer of 'brocade' prints (*nishiki-e*) – the name of which is related to the sumptuous, embroidered silks produced by the weavers in the Nishijin district in Kyoto – occupies a special place. His images are distinguished by the warmth of their colours, the effects of transparency, the grace of their frail, beautiful women, and the use of monochrome backgrounds that enhance the elegance of his compositions and the dialogues woven between the motifs and inscriptions.

The poetic genre of the *haiku* in particular, whose brevity exalts a momentary emotion, takes us back to the aspiration to lightness that for almost three hundred years infused the culture during the Tokugawa shogunate and marked, socially and stylistically, the foundations of Japan's modern aesthetics. It can be felt, too, as championed by the great painter Kanō Tanyū (1602-1674), in the pure compositions of the Kanō school, and in the decorative musicality of the works of the Rimpa movement. It is also apparent in the art of living steeped in Zen Buddhism, in the refinement and creativity of the gestures, instruments and materials characteristic of the tea ceremony, and in the water and whipped foam of matcha…

JOURNEYS FOLLOWING THE THREAD

One summer's day, when she was still a child, my daughter came running in, out of breath, shouting: 'Mummy, a cicada is being born!' Rushing straight to the tree in our garden, I arrived just as it was emerging. Fragile, soft as mist, it slowly unfolded its wings, gradually freeing itself from its rigid shell. I stayed there for a long time, transfixed by the spectacle. As the bright green wings gently unfurled, I could see they were full of life, transparent and uniquely beautiful. 'I'd love to make a textile as beautiful as this one day', was my fervent wish.

Shortly after building my studio in the garden of our family home, I bought some very fine raw thread (*kiito* 生糸, 'living' silk thread) twenty-seven deniers* thick. These yarns are normally used for making kimonos or obis (kimono belts) and need to be twisted and combined with seven to eight lengths of thread. Although I had invested in a very expensive silk-throwing machine, I had very little time to devote to spinning while caring for two daughters, aged two and three at the time.

One day, however, I wondered what would happen if I tried to weave a single twenty-seven-denier thread as it was, without twisting. Learning to spin had been part of my apprenticeship in Tokyo, so I was well aware of the scope of this challenge, which the weavers in my circle thought impossible. But, urged on by the desire to make a fabric as light as the wings of a dragonfly or a cicada, I gave it a try. I clearly remember the first time I put that twenty-seven-denier thread on the loom. I had never seen or heard of anyone weaving with such a fine yarn. There was nothing for it but to try. I drew on all the skills I'd acquired until then and proceeded methodically, taking care with each step. I adjusted the loom, and when I threw the shuttle and put my foot on the pedal, I remember shaking slightly. But once I got into the rhythm, I was surprised to find how well everything was going. I realised that the finest silk threads were just as strong. It wasn't until much later that I discovered that silk thread is stronger than iron of the same thickness. As my confidence grew, I began to weave with thinner and thinner threads.

Uehara Michiko, 2024, from the exhibition catalogue

* Denier (den) is the unit used to measure linear density, i.e., the weight in grams per 9000 metres of yarn. For example: 1 den = 1 gram/9000 metres of yarn.

THE WINDS OF RYŪKYŪ

The universal message conveyed by Uehara Michiko in her quest for transparency and grace is all the more powerful because it is deeply rooted in the rich cultural and natural heritage of her native land, both as regards the raw materials, which reflect the surrounding vegetation, and their inspirations, imbued with the vast horizons of the seashores. Her works are in constant dialogue with the landscapes, spirituality, and history of Okinawa. Through them, we hear the still-vibrant echo of the ancient Ryūkyū Kingdom, an independent nation made up of a string of islands stretching between Kyūshū and Taiwan. The archipelago was home to a highly refined and cosmopolitan culture that placed great importance on the practice of the arts from the time of the founding of its capital Naha (formerly known as Shuri) in 1429 until the annexation of the Ryūkū Kingdom into the modern Meiji state in 1879.

As a neighbour of Japan, Korea, and Ming China (1368-1644), to which it was tributary, this small state was located at the meeting point of maritime routes to East and South-East Asia and was in regular contact with Siam, the Kingdom of Patani, the Khmer Empire, Malacca, Champa, and Java, and as such acquired a leading international reputation through its commercial and diplomatic role. The vitality of this cultural mix went hand in hand with the establishment of a strong religious syncretism, nourished by indigenous beliefs in 'other worlds' expressed in the foundation of shrines dedicated to sacred stones and other spiritual presences. Invigorated by secular animist beliefs, the principal figures in the Buddhist and Shinto pantheons were fused with Amamikyo, the creation goddess of the Ryūkyū Islands.

However, on 1 April 1945 'the wind rose' on this resplendent land blessed on all sides, and, as portrayed in director Miyazaki Hayao's 2013 animated film of the same name, despite the fierce resistance of the famous Mitsubishi Zero fighter planes, the archipelago's sacred beaches and turquoise waters were stained red with blood during the terrible eighty-two-day Battle of Okinawa – the 'typhoon of steel' that wiped out a quarter of the population.
But, faced by the scars of the post-war period, the subsequent attitude of 'we must try to live' in this graveyard by the sea is certainly what prompted the young student Uehara Michiko to flee her native island while it was still under American administration. But it was precisely these few years spent away from Okinawa, in the Japanese capital Tokyo, and her discovery in the early 1970s of the collection of ancient textiles from the Ryūkyū Islands, carefully preserved in the Japan Folk Crafts Museum (Mingeikan), that awoke her sense of identity and crystallised her artistic vocation. After training with illustrious elders in traditional Okinawan weaving and dyeing techniques, as testified in particular by her mastery of *ikat* patterns, in 1979 she moved with her family to Haebaru, a small town a few kilometres from Naha.

LIKE A PRAYER ADDRESSED TO THE HEAVENS

In her desire to magnify the fluttering of her precious *grège* threads, Uehara Michiko prolongs their essence. The 'celestial offering' of silkworms, whose character (蚕 *kaiko*) is composed of the radicals 'worm/insect' (虫) and 'sky' (天), refers directly to the firmament, just as the lushness of the trees and dye plants that grow in and around Uehara's garden are celebrated and condensed in her tightly woven fabrics, the colourful shimmer of their textures, and the poetic abstraction of their motifs.

Sustained by this back and forth between earth and sky, and by her ceaseless experiments with fibres, Uehara tested the resistance of textiles, weaving at the threshold of the visible, constantly pushing her own limits. The ultimate, liberating step was taken in 2006 when, exhausted, she succeeded in creating a fabric 3.5 m long and 40 cm wide with threads measuring no more than three deniers made from a single silkworm filament, thus weighing about 3 grams. In her hands, before our very eyes, we see the elusive, iridescent ballet of a dragonfly wing, or the birth of '*akezuba*' weaving.

In addition to the iridescence of its wings and the crisp elegance of its outline as it flits back and forth, the powerful symbolic and auspicious significance of this insect, to which Japanese culture attributes virtues that were particularly esteemed by the warrior caste (courage, strength, victory, transformation, and resurrection), make it one of the most popular motifs in the Japanese decorative and literary repertoire. Under the ancient name *akitsu* (秋津), it has also been associated since the dawn of time with the land of Japan itself, which the legendary first emperor Jimmu (660-585 BCE) believed looked like two dragonflies mating; it is also what led Uehara Michiko to borrow the creature's name for her creations. *The Annals of Japan* (*Nihon shoki*), completed in 720, also describes an extraordinary incident that befell Emperor Yuryaku. (418 or 428 -479) Joining a hunting party on the heathland of Yoshino (in the south of what is now Nara Prefecture), he was set upon by a horsefly but was saved from its bite by a brave dragonfly. In gratitude, the emperor gave the order to name the area Akitsu-no (The Plain of the Dragonfly), an appellation that was later elevated to cover the whole of Japan as Akitsushima (The Islands of the Dragonflies), the country's oldest known name.

Stretched on the loom like so many musical scales, fabrics in the making of Uehara Michiko seem to live in harmony with this space, echoing with the rustlings of the garden, watched over by the spirit of the place, given material form by a small wooden altar, and the guardian lion or *shisa*, clinging to the white tiles of the roof. *Coral Blue* is a most affecting example, borrowing as it does from the translucent blue of the coast and criss-crossed by ripples coloured with indigo from the Ryūkyū Islands. Similarly, one detects in the folds of the silk in *Heaven Touch*, *Sunset*, and *Touch of Darkness*, a slight breeze blowing across the white sand, and the glint of the sun's or the moon's

rays on the shore. The beauty of a timeless landscape, known since childhood and yet so fragile, tinged by memories of war and tears. We must try to live… and to rise.
We are reminded of this by the use of auspicious motifs known as *tate-waku* (立涌), which were used exclusively in the clothing of the court nobility during the Heian period and are also present in *Dear Uncle Klee*. Here, the sinuous vertical lines suggest steam rising slowly into the sky – hence spiritual awakening, the ability to surpass oneself. Weaving, like a prayer addressed to the blue, Uehara Michiko's hands probe 'other worlds'.

BEYOND BORDERS, THE FLIGHT OF THE DRAGONFLY

Again I'm alive!
The height of the sky,
a red dragonfly.
生きて仰ぐ空の高さよ蜻蛉
Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), Autumn 1910

For Uehara, her feats of technical prowess and mental concentration, which can sometimes be read as self-portraits, are also journeys of exploration. A good example is *Monsoon*, a work created during the COVID pandemic. This resilient and cosmopolitan endeavour stretches over several metres, using six varieties of plant material woven end to end, in keeping with the cultural heritage of the golden age of the Ryūkyū Kingdom: banana fibre, ramies from Okinawa, Korea, China, and India, and pineapple fibre from the Philippines. On this journey without walls or boundaries, undertaken in a daily battle against confinement, the artist, attentive to her breath, discerned and fixed, in the warp and weft, the flow of her emotions and the variations in the weather, a little in the manner of the masters of *hakai renga* 俳諧連歌 (popular linked verse), whose prose expresses in a single breath – the time it takes to recite three verses, or seventeen syllables – the impermanence and insignificance of the things of the world. *Monsoon* thus joins the peregrinations of the most famous master of them all, Matsuo Munefusa, known by his pen name Bashō (1644–1694), meaning 'banana tree'. This poet and tireless pilgrim wrote sophisticated works permeated by Buddhist undercurrents, in which he subtly interweaves Japanese and Chinese literary traditions, both classical poetry and prose, in order to portray the world in its most humble and insignificant manifestations: a blade of grass, the scent of a flower, the winds of the monsoon, the flutter of a dragonfly's wing.

Immersed in the cycles of life, from the chrysalis to the plants in her garden, Uehara Michiko's textile journeys transcend borders and defy gravity, reaching out here and elsewhere to the most improbable dreams. Her voice and her art, emerging from the waves of the Pacific, so far from Alfred Baur's Switzerland, connect with his pioneering and peace-loving spirit, just as they do with the exploits of the Swiss explorer Bertrand Piccard whose solar-powered aircraft, a giant, silent dragonfly combining extreme strength and lightness in the ribs of its carbon-fibre structure, intelligently threads a harmonious course between humanity, earth, and sky. As we celebrate the ties that unite our collection, its founder and Switzerland to the 'island of the dragonfly', let us make way for dreams and the persevering, inspired gestures that bring them to life.

Texts: Laure Schwartz-Arenales, Curator of the exhibition
English translation: Timothy Stroud and Julian Comoy

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Dates	30 October 2024 – 2 February 2025
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art Rue Munier-Romilly 8 1206 Genève – Suisse +41 22 704 32 82 www.fondation-baur.ch musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2 pm to 6 pm, until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
60 years of the museum Tickets	**Free admission every Saturday (until 21 December)** Full CHF 15.- Unemployed, disabled people and students CHF 10.-
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Public guided visits	Wednesdays at 6.30 pm 6 and 20 November, 4 and 18 December 2024 15 and 29 January 2025
Private guided visits	Reservation required mediation@fondationbaur.ch

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