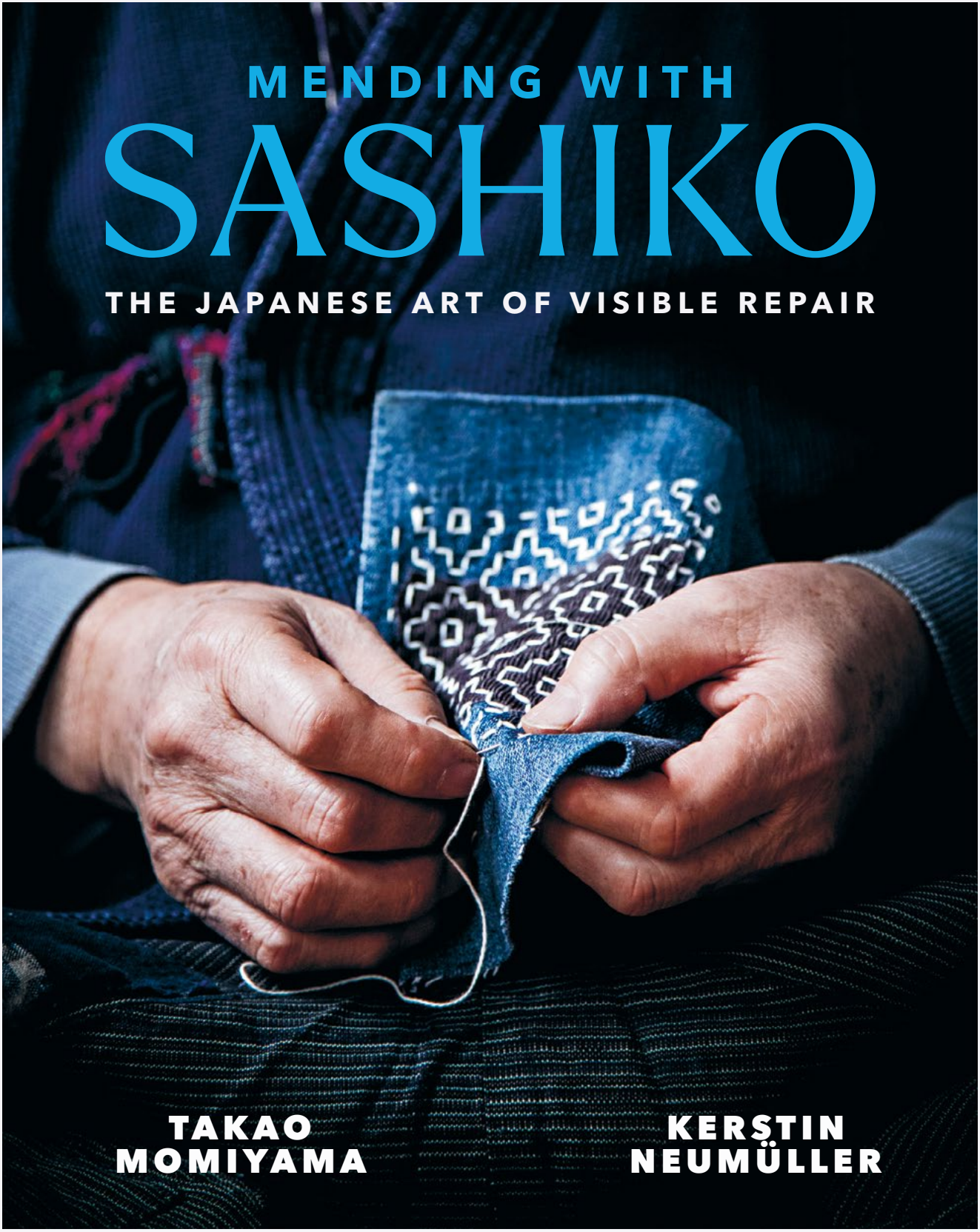

MENDING WITH
SASHIKO
THE JAPANESE ART OF VISIBLE REPAIR
TAKAO MOMIYAMA
KERSTIN NEUMÜLLER

FOREWORD

Sashiko looks so easy at first glance. It's just standard stitches, up and down! But as with all handicrafts, the world of sashiko becomes more and more complicated the closer you look at it. Different patterns have different requirements, and after a while it's easy to get lost in all the complexities associated with the art of sewing those simple stitches.

We are Takao 'Momi' Momiyama and Kerstin Neumüller. We both love sashiko and boro, which tell the story of a fabric's journey and its rebirth through reuse and repair.

We believe that sashiko should be easy and accessible, and for us there aren't any rights or wrongs when you sew – the important thing is that the result is what you want it to be. In this book we show examples of our own handiwork, and our hope is that you as the reader will be able to dive into the book and find your own way of mending clothes with sashiko!

TAKAO 'MOMI' MOMIYAMA

I grew up as a farmer's son 100 kilometres north of Tokyo. My parents worked with hemp and silk, and as a boy I played with my brother among mulberry trees and rice fields. When I was 12 I started practicing Japanese martial arts and eventually became a master in iaido, which can be described as the 'art of drawing the sword'. In the 1970s I moved to Sweden and today I live in the countryside in Scania in the south of Sweden where I have my training studio.

When I practice martial arts in the winter I use 'tabi', the sewn Japanese socks that are divided into two sections with one section for the big toe and one for the other four toes. The socks wear down quickly and my whole mending journey started one winter when I didn't have any money to buy new tabi; I had to try to mend them. Mending tabi using a sewing machine was too difficult so I sewed by hand using the simplest of stitches: running stitch. I still use that first mended pair of tabi today, and mend them when needed.

A move from the city to a house with a garden meant gardening work and more clothes to mend. I worked my way through my wardrobe and mended trousers, shirts, jumpers, jackets, socks, t-shirts and so on. I practice the idea of 'mottainai', a Japanese expression for that which is too good to throw away, and my inspiration comes from my collections of patched and mended textiles from north Japan. I study the old textiles and look at how they are sewn, but I don't make exact copies. You can say that I carry on with a tradition but I am not traditional in my method of sewing; instead, I use a specific technique as a springboard and then expand on the expression.

Prolonging the life of textiles through patching and mending is my contribution to the philosophy around mottainai, and I want to pass that on to the next generation. The textile cultural heritage enriches and unites us over both geographical and generational borders and I want to thank the people who started sewing sashiko once upon a time, in particular my mum who showed me how to sew by hand. Now I carry their legacy on.

KERSTIN NEUMÜLLER

Making has always been central in my life. During my upbringing in the countryside, it was about making my world bigger, more imaginative – a way to expand my horizons without having to travel far. I am so fascinated by what feels 'genuine' and it is a continuous search, a red thread through most things that I do, the chase after that feeling that 'this time it's for real'.

When I was around 25, I heard about sashiko for the first time. I had just started my tailor training and saw a picture of dense, white stitches against a blue background – a new world opened before me. What was it, how did it work? I, who already did a lot of hand sewing, soaked up the new technique like a sponge.

A while later I was asked to write my first book. *Indigo* became a recipe collection for indigo dyers, with craft projects as serving suggestions. Over the years I have written more books, and when I was asked to write one about sashiko together with Momi, it was a very easy decision. Of course I wanted to! In this book I am the narrator with focus on Momi's handiwork, but I have also snuck in a few of my own projects.

WHAT IS SASHIKO?

Sashiko originates from Japan and has become associated with embroidery and mending but, in essence, it's neither one nor the other. The word means 'little stab' and involves sewing small stitches onto a piece of fabric. In the beginning, these stitches had two purposes: to hold several layers of fabric together and in this way create warmer garments, or to reinforce a piece of fabric to make it more durable. You can say that sashiko in its original form is a proactive mending technique; you'll know from experience where the fabric will wear down and can then reinforce it even before a hole has appeared. Therefore, the closest we come in England to explaining what sashiko really is, would be to call it 'a sewing technique' rather than embroidery or mending. But, of course, you could say 'a sewing technique that is used for embroidery or mending' if you like. Over time, people have started to use the concept that is associated with sashiko for everything from mending clothes, sewing decorative embroideries and transforming printed patterns, to decorating everyday items and using it in art.

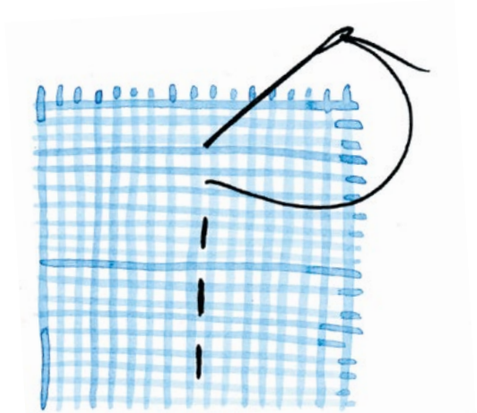
You could say that sashiko is constantly evolving, but in its original form sashiko is a hand-sewing technique. You only use one type of stitch: running stitch. It's not just the Japanese who sewed with a running stitch; similar techniques can be found all over the world, and perhaps the most prominent one is the Indian 'kantha', which involves sewing worn-down sari fabrics in layers to create new textiles. What is distinctive for sashiko, however, is that in its original form it is often sewn with white thread onto a blue base. Sometimes the stitches form geometrical patterns, but they can also be free flowing and form figures such as flowers, or *mon*, which are symbols for different families, similar to a coat of arms.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when the tradition of sewing sashiko appeared, but by the time the 19th century had passed it had been long-established and different local variations had evolved. The end of the Edo period (1868), the opening up of Japanese society for trade and foreign ideas and eventual industrialization were factors that radically changed the lifestyle of the Japanese. The countryside population's habit of making what they needed themselves or relying on local craftspeople was replaced by paid work that generated money with which you could buy mass-produced goods. In that society, sashiko no longer had a natural place, and by the end of the Second World War only a few practitioners remained.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF SASHIKO

The tradition of sewing sashiko developed in north Japan where people often lived fairly isolated lives and weren't exposed to many outside influences. In places like these, specific local traditions often appear, for example dialects, different ways of cooking – or sewing sashiko. You usually talk of three main categories of sewing sashiko: *hitomezashi, moyozashi* and *kogin-zashi*.

We have chosen to write sashiko when we talk about the whole group of techniques, but -zashi when we talk about a specific technique. It can seem confusing, but it lies closer to the Japanese pronunciation than writing -sashi.

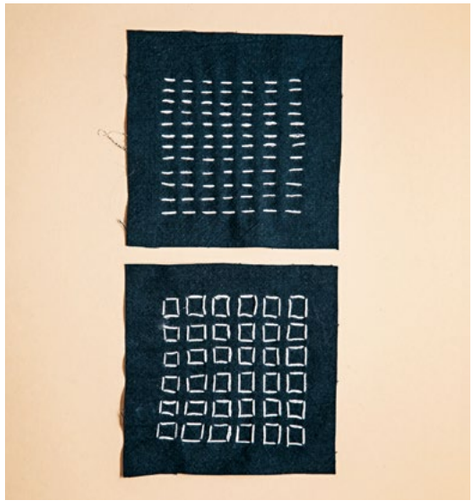


HITOMEZASHI

Hitomezashi is a technique that involves forming geometrical patterns by sewing different layers of stitches on top of each other. For example, sew all vertical stitches first and then all horizontal. Sometimes you also sew a layer of diagonal stitches and, depending on how the stitches in the different layers are placed, you can make different patterns. One common rule to stick to is that the stitches should all be of equal length, and the gaps in between them should also be of equal length. If the stitch is 5mm (¼in) long, the gap before the next stitch should also be 5mm (¼in). This is a rule that can sometimes be broken, but it's good to stick to when you start off sewing hitomezashi.

How do you make the stitches even? If you have sewn hitomezashi all your life you'll get even stitches automatically (see 'Sewing patterns without a ruler', page 46), but if you're not used to it there are a few good tricks you can use.

For coarse fabrics with plain weave, you can count the threads. Then you can, for example, sew over two threads and under two and so on. You can also draw up a grid on the fabric, with chalk or a water-soluble textile pen that you can wash off once you're finished.

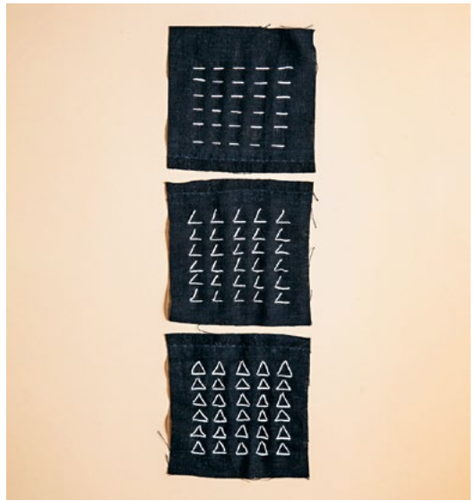


LITTLE SQUARES

All hitomezashi patterns start with sewing all stitches in one direction first. Here Momi has started with horizontal rows that are placed parallel to each other.

When all the horizontal stitches are sewn, you can sew all the vertical stitches. Momi turns the fabric 90 degrees (see page 42) so that he can keep working from right to left, and then he sews new rows. Now the new stitches will bind together with the ones he sewed in the first layer, so that they together form a square.

TIP! If the stitches in the first layer are longer than the second layer, the squares will become rectangular.

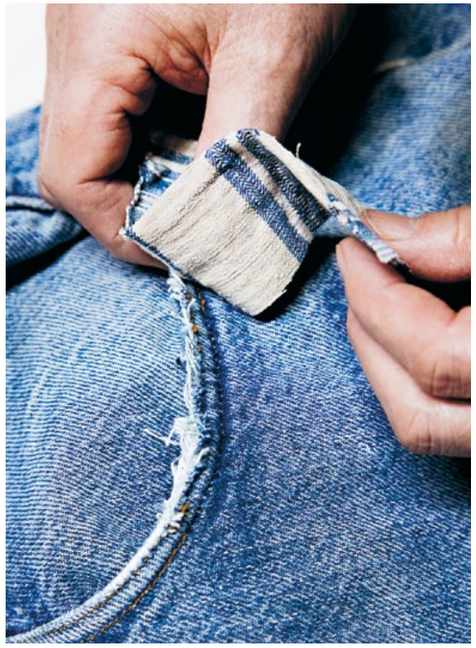


TRIANGLES

The horizontal stitches for a triangle pattern are sewn the same way as for little squares, in parallel rows of horizontal stitches. When you have finished this layer you can turn the fabric 45 degrees and sew a layer of diagonal stitches, and finally you finish off by turning the fabric again and sewing another layer of diagonal stitches.

MENDING A JEANS POCKET

The edge of a jeans pocket can easily get worn down, and it's common that the pocket becomes loose along the seam at the inside of the opening. Momi sews a protective patch along the edge of the pocket, and the jeans are ready for new adventures.



METHOD

Cut a strip of mending fabric that is slightly longer than the damaged area and approximately 3cm (1¼in) wide. Fold it over the pocket edge and pin into place so that you have about the same amount of mending patch on both the outside and the inside of the pocket edge.

Don't fold over the mending patch's edges; leave them raw so that the patch doesn't get bulky and annoying.

ATTACH THE MENDING PATCH

Now you can start sewing the patch in place. Momi attaches it with small rows of stitches that go through all fabric layers at the same time. When you come to the edge of the mending patch it's good if the last stitch runs over the edge to secure it in place and to prevent the fabric from fraying.

DONE!

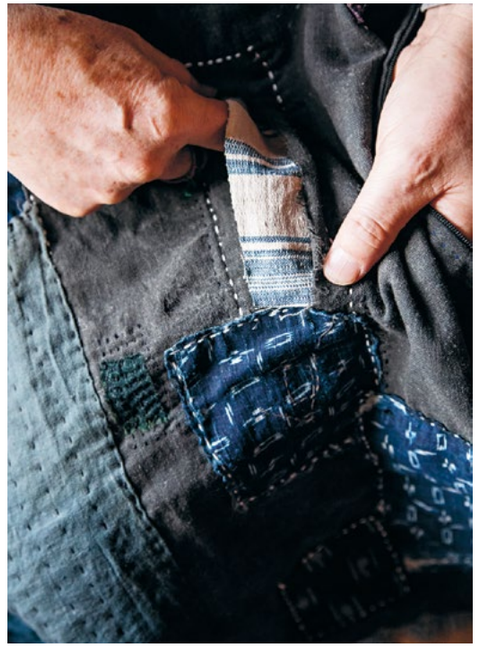
The fabric is fairly thick at the pocket edge, so it's not possible to use unshin stitches here. When you have sewn the whole strip in place with small stitches you're done!

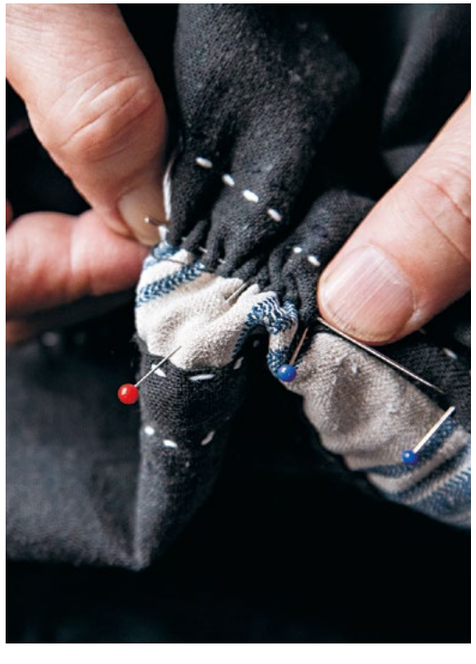
MENDING A CUSHION COVER

A cushion cover made from already fragile old Japanese fabrics needed mending once more. Momi made an extra-durable mend using two fabric patches.

METHOD

Start by attaching a patch to the inside of the cushion cover. You can sew the stitches from the inside or the outside, it doesn't matter, but here they are sewn from the outside. The seam needs to be placed at least 2cm (¾in) from the edge of the hole, so the patch needs to be slightly larger than that!





PATCH NUMBER TWO

Cut out another patch that is large enough to insert between the fabric of the cushion and the first patch (see the previous photograph). Position it so that it sits in the pocket created by the first patch behind the hole. Fold in the edges of the hole and secure in place with pins (or basting stitches).

SEW ALONG THE EDGES

Now you can sew along the edges of the hole to the fabric of both patches. Momi uses unshin stitches, but yokogushi will work just as well.

SASHIKO DIARY ENTRY, 08.06.2020
'A field landscape. I'm imagining that the seam between the two blue fabric pieces creates the tracks from a tractor that has driven past.'

SASHIKO DIARY ENTRY, 05.10.2022
'I'm practicing unshin. Every day I pick a new colour for the thread!'

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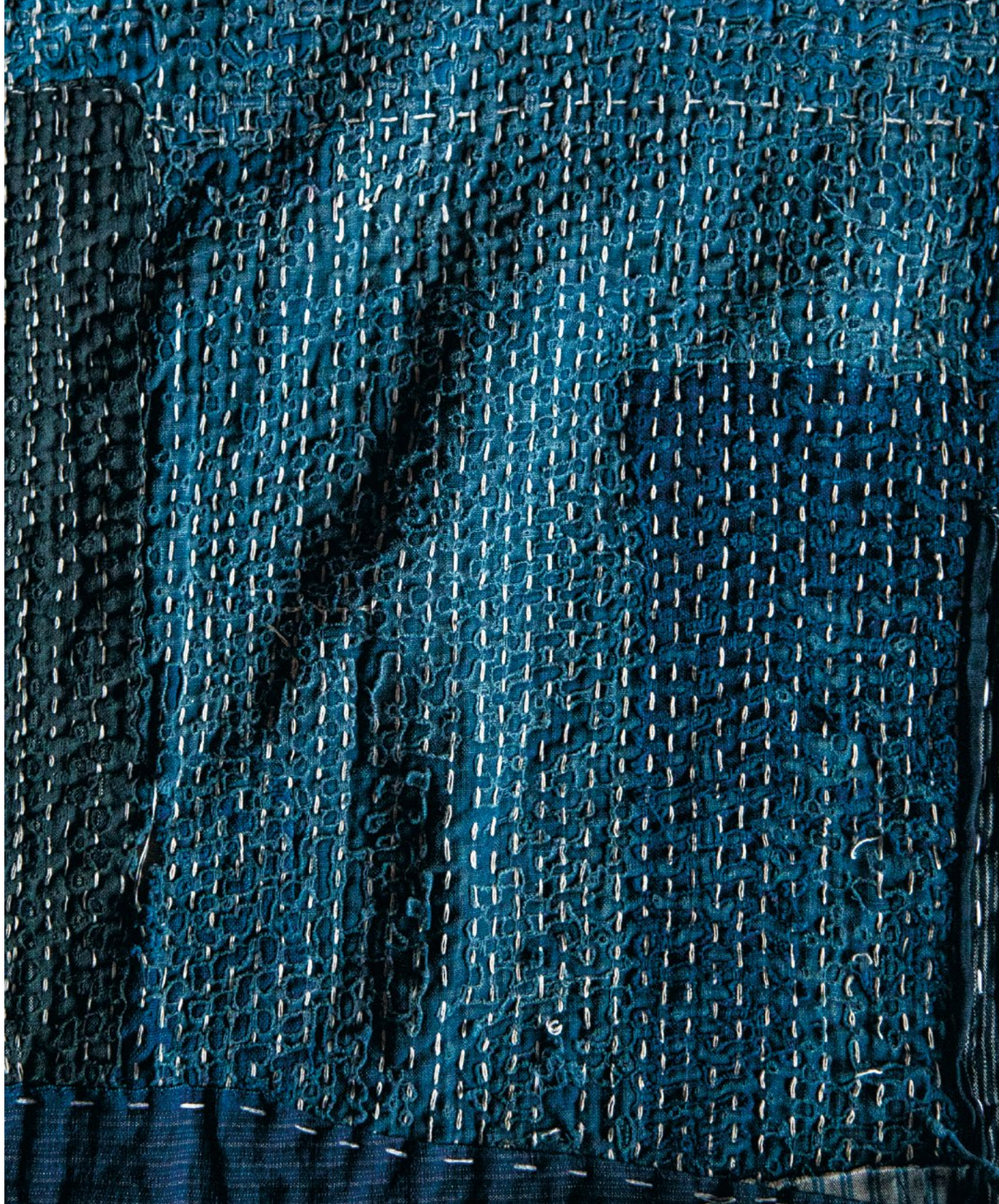

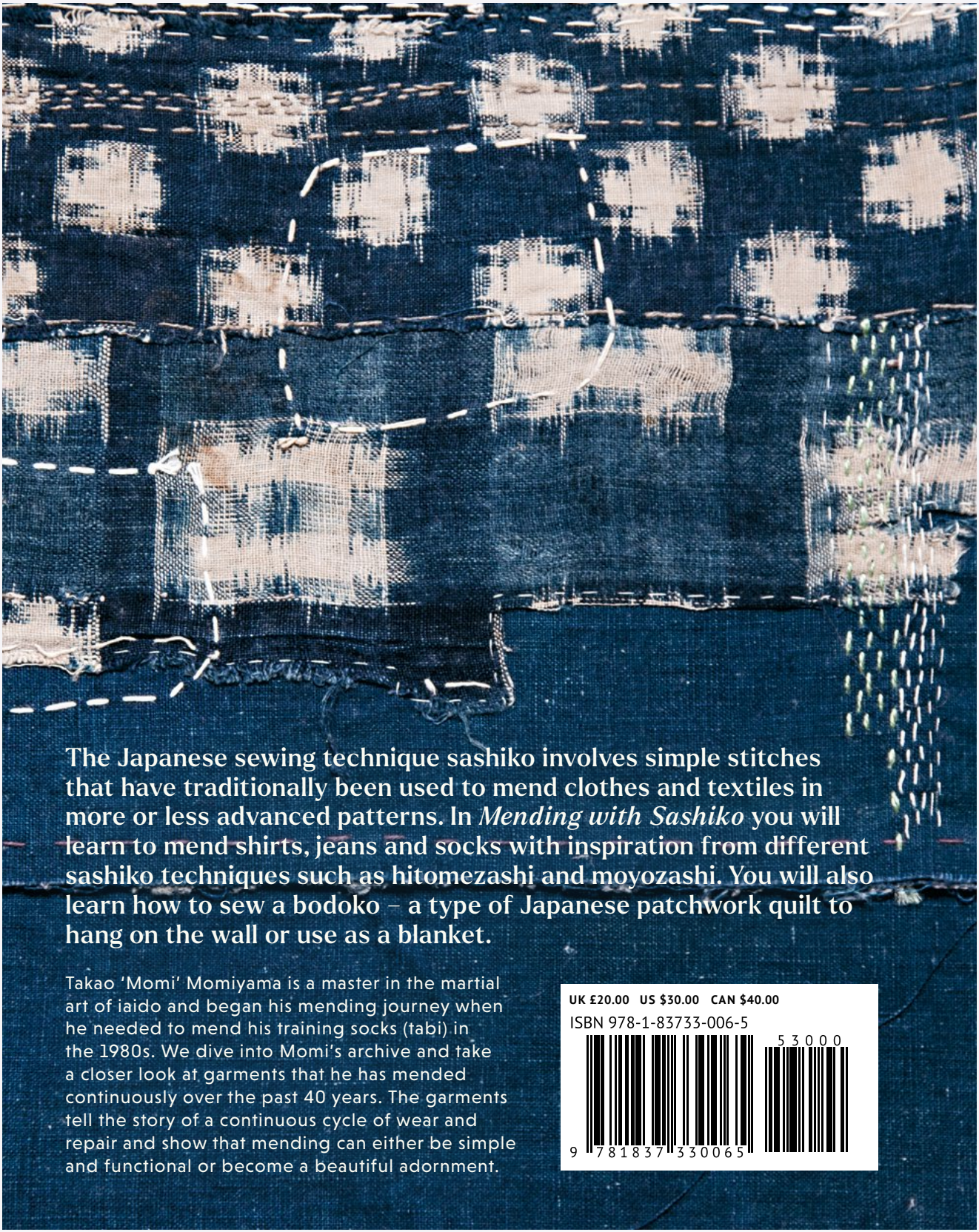

The Japanese sewing technique sashiko involves simple stitches that have traditionally been used to mend clothes and textiles in more or less advanced patterns. In *Mending with Sashiko* you will learn to mend shirts, jeans and socks with inspiration from different sashiko techniques such as hitomezashi and moyozashi. You will also learn how to sew a bodoko – a type of Japanese patchwork quilt to hang on the wall or use as a blanket.

Takao 'Momi' Momiyama is a master in the martial art of iaido and began his mending journey when he needed to mend his training socks (tabi) in the 1980s. We dive into Momi's archive and take a closer look at garments that he has mended continuously over the past 40 years. The garments tell the story of a continuous cycle of wear and repair and show that mending can either be simple and functional or become a beautiful adornment.

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