



Trashmagination Podcast #68 – Bojagi or Korean Patchwork

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

In today's episode, we're going to talk about a type of Korean patchwork called bojagi or pojagi. It is a form of creative reuse because it involves using up fabric scraps. Of course, the whole point of patchwork is to use up scraps, but something I love about bojagi is that the sewing technique allows you to use more delicate fabrics that might not do well with other patchwork sewing styles. This includes fabrics such as silk, ramie or organza.

But before I get too much into the details, what is bojagi? The word bojagi means wrapping cloth in Korean. Not all bojagi are patchwork. Many are a solid piece of fabric. You might remember back in episode 63 that I talked about creative reuse gift wrapping options and I talked about furoshiki or the Japanese tradition of wrapping with fabric. But of course many cultures wrap gifts with fabric. And bojagi are used to wrap more than gifts. They can also be used instead of a lunch bag, school bag or grocery bag. I saw a video about how precious and sentimental papers were sometimes wrapped in bojagi, or blankets were wrapped in them before putting them in the closet which seems like a great idea to keep things tidy.

I became interested in bojagi after following fiber artist Kiva Motnyk from the Thompson Street Studio [<http://www.thompsonstreetstudio.com/>] in New York. I love all her quilts but I was particularly drawn to the ones that she would display in a window or outside, and the sunlight would shine through them. I could see they were made from delicate fabrics and the seams were finished in a way so that it looked beautiful on both sides even when it was clearly one layer of fabric. Most quilts are made like a sandwich with a top piece, a middle piece that provides warmth called the batting, and then a backing piece. Quilting is actually the act of connecting these three layers with stitches. When the quilter makes the top, this is called piecing. In most traditional quilts, the quilter sews the seams so that they look great on one side and then edges of the seams hang loose on the other side. These seams get hidden when you add the batting and backing. But that was clearly not what was happening with Kiva's quilts so I wanted to learn more.

Somehow I realized she was doing a technique called bojagi so I started watching videos of bojagi artists. Then this month, the Korean Cultural Center in Washington DC has an exhibit of bojagi by three fiber artists [<http://www.koreaculturedc.org/En/Index.asp>], and I was so lucky that I went to the exhibit opening. And now I made my first bojagi piece, and it's absolutely beautiful, so I wanted to share what I'm learning with you.

Stories from Bojagi Artists

I learned a lot about traditional bojagi at the exhibit at the Korean Cultural Center. The exhibit is actually called "Tradition Transformed" and it's there until February 22, 2019. The exhibit includes work by three artists and all three spoke at the exhibit opening.

The first speaker was Kumjoo Ahn [<http://bojagiart.blogspot.com/>] who grew up in Korea and talked about how she used bojagi every day as a child. She said bojagi were more a source of shame for her because it was the option for a family who could not afford a school bag. She noted that bojagi were made by women from remnants after making clothes, especially the beautiful hanbock or silk dress worn at formal events like weddings. Kumjoo Ahn became an expert in dyeing fabrics with roots, berries, bark and leaves such as gardenia and indigo. She also studied traditional English hand embroidery and now combines these natural-dyed fabrics with embroidery.

The next speaker was Julia Kwon [<http://www.juliakwon.com>] who grew up in northern Virginia where I live. She explores many topics with bojagi including ethnicity and gender. She wraps human figures in bojagi which speaks to the objectification of the female body. She sometimes uses fabrics are not from Korea but that speak to how Korean culture is presented as exotic. She made bojagi in red and blue to talk about the political divides in the United States. She incorporates safety pins in her work as a symbol of being an ally to those who are being attacked. I'll share a video interview with Julia in the show notes [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgcVeHWwBFU>]. Julia has four exhibits in the Washington DC area this year so I'll link to her exhibit calendar [<http://www.juliakwon.com/news.html>].

The final speaker was Wonju Seo [<http://wonjuseo.com/>]. She talked about how she likes to "paint" with fabric by overlapping two differently-colored pieces of fabric to make new colors. She also makes wearable bojagi. She showed a video showing how she made and installed an enormous piece at Stony Brook University in New York [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxBQEEfkfKI>]. The piece was called White Wonderland and it was inspired by her childhood memories of seeing how sunlight changes the appearance of snow. I'll share that video in the show notes because it shows in four minutes how she takes small fabric pieces to make a piece that is 26 by 32 feet wide.

I took many photos of the bojagi at the exhibit, so check out the show notes! One of my favorite aspects of bojagi is that some are done in a monochromatic palette, meaning they might be made only with white, beige or black fabrics, but the fabrics might not be exactly the same weave. Some might have more shine or pattern. So it's a subtle thing but such lovely detail when you look closely.

Making Bojagi

So that exhibit was more than enough to get me inspired to make my first bojagi piece. I was attracted to this style of patchwork because people give me fabric scraps that are all different types of fabrics, and most are not fabrics traditionally used in quilting. I was very keen to find a way to make these fabrics into something beautiful and useful.

The tutorial I watched was by Vivika Hansen DeNegre and it's less than five minutes long [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCVvCjTnuSI>]. It will be in the show notes. For those who do garment sewing, this method is making a seam that looks great on both sides is called a French seam. In Vivika's tutorial, she shows how to make bojagi with a sewing machine. Of course traditionally it was done only with hand sewing, and mostly with very tiny stitches called whip stitches. So bojagi can be a great project to take with you or if you don't have a sewing machine. While you might not need a sewing machine, you really do need an iron to press the pieces flat as you put them together and to press your seams in place before you sew them. You can definitely hold the seams in position while sewing but it's much easier if you iron.

If you want to learn how to do bojagi in a class, one of the best known instructors in the United States is Youngmin Lee who offers classes in Pleasanton, California [<http://www.youngminlee.com>]. She also has an instructional video.

Although I love hand sewing, I sewed my first piece with my sewing machine because I wanted to complete a bojagi and do this podcast before the exhibit is over! The bojagi I made is 16 inches by 12 inches, or 40 by 30 centimeters. I made it from silky pink fabrics that were upholstery samples, likely for curtains. I had a bunch of pieces in a similar pink and beige color palette. I absolutely love this piece – how it looks in the sunlight or on a table. It looks delicate but it is very strong. It's fun to photograph displayed in a window because the seams look like the lines in stained glass.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear what you think about bojagi and creative reuse of delicate fabrics at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see trash as a source of art in your life!