



Journeys of the Soul

Betsy Sterling Benjamin

Textiles that explore the physical and spiritual world. *by Katherine Aimone*

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ABOVE: Blue Lotus of Lumbini, 2006; rozome (wax resist) on silk; 42½" x 30½". Photo: Mark Fernald.

Betsy Sterling Benjamin has chosen a “path with heart” that leads her on both physical and spiritual journeys. Her exploration of the world, and of Buddhism, is reflected thoughtfully in her highly accomplished textile work. She became interested in Buddhism while living in Japan and is now in preparation for ordination in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. For her, Buddhism has served as what she calls “a coming home.”

In her art, she focuses on “transcendental imagery,” which she defines as content that evolves out of intuitive rather than objective experiences. Falling into this category are her most recent silk scrolls, which were shown February 3–March 2 in an exhibition, *Songs of the Buddha Heart*, at the Manchester Buddhist Centre in Manchester, England.

These works eloquently convey her spirituality. *Buddha Heart* is an example of her ability to aptly express her devotion. It is also evidence of her masterful approach to rozome—the highly evolved art of Japanese wax resist. Benjamin is a passionate proponent and teacher of this technique, and she is the author


of *The World of Rozome: Wax-Resist Textiles of Japan* (Kodansha International Publishers; 1996, 2002). Scribed with contemplative wording composed by Uryen Sangharakshita, *Buddha Heart* effectively marries visual and written reflection.

“My work is a meditation and a centering in this diverse world,” notes Benjamin. This diverse world has piqued her curiosity since she was a child, and she has persistently found ways to explore it. To usher in the millennium, for example, she created seven stunning ceremonial robes, or kesa, which she designates as “cloths of healing and unity.” Each silken piece represents one of the continents, and, although joined as a group by the use of a common form, each one is varied in its content and imagery. The robes are of dyed silk from India, China, Japan, and Indonesia. They are further embroidered, appliquéd, fused, and stenciled with gold powders.

Initially exhibited as a group at the Honen-in Temple in

Kyoto, the kesa were distributed throughout the world and displayed on January 1, 2000, in Tasmania, Zimbabwe, Antarctica, Spain, Peru, Japan, and the United States. They are joined together again in a current exhibition, *A Sense of Place: An Artist's Tribute to the Seven Continents*, at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (through June 3).

Benjamin lived in Japan from 1981 until 2000, when she returned to New England. She consistently makes space in her life to spend time away from her home studio to work and study in other countries. "Traveling feeds my art," she says. "To remove myself from all that is familiar and go live for a number of months in another culture increases my awareness." In early 2007, for example, she is traveling in England and then India.

Through internal reflection, travel, and work, Benjamin has created a deeply satisfying life. She reflects on this intentional life: "Choosing a path combining art, beauty, and a life of spiritual direction has made me very content. I try to live a life of awareness and mindfulness . . . awake to wonder, gratitude, receiving and giving, and compassion and kindness." 

The artist's website is www.betsysterlingbenjamin.com.



ABOVE: *Buddha Heart*, 2006; rozome (wax resist), wax etching, gold-powder stencil on silk; 49" x 16". Photo: Mark Fernald.
 LEFT: Benjamin's seven kesa (Buddhist ceremonial robes), on view through June 3 at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, commemorate the seven continents. Visit www.betsysterlingbenjamin.com for full images of the kesa. Photos: You. Kobayashi (top) and the artist (bottom).