

A Conversation with Barb Suess

Barbara Suess first came across temari when living in Japan. Years later and oceans away in Alabama, her sister made the same discovery—an exquisite folk craft from ancient Japan that makes for beautiful handmade projects that fascinate almost anyone who sees them. Best of all, these fun, colorful handballs require nothing more than a needle, threads, and enthusiasm!

In her new book, *Japanese Temari: A Fun and Colorful Spin on an Ancient Craft*, Barbara introduces 25 original temari designs—and shows you how to make them. Caution, as Barbara warns, “Temari stitching can be highly addictive!”

—Anne Knudsen, Summer 2007

I have never seen anything quite like your temari before. Tell me, what exactly is a temari ball?

That’s always the first question I’m asked! “What in the world is that? What’s it for?” The short answer: temari are an ancient Japanese handicraft. They are thread balls made as gifts for children on special occasions. The craft goes back 1400 years, to the time when *kemari* (football) was brought to Japan from China. It reached the height of its popularity in the early 1600s. When rubber was introduced to Japan, temari making declined but, thank heavens, the skills were not totally lost. Today, it has changed from a common folk craft to an intricate art form.

You say you are addicted to temari making. When did you first take it up as a hobby? I’ve always loved handwork with fibers. It’s hard for me to sit and watch TV without having some busy work for my hands. I had seen temari when I lived in Japan in the late 1980s, but at that time my passion was smocking and sewing dresses for little girls. Around the time my daughters refused to wear lace, my sister showed me this fabulous “new” craft that her friend figured out from a book written in Japanese. I needed a little stitching project to carry along with me on the many days I spent carpooling my daughters to school and music lessons. Temari was perfect. Everything I needed fit inside a small box so I’d grab it and go. I became addicted almost right away, probably because I loved figuring out the puzzle in each design. That was in early 2000.

Temari are beautiful, but they look so difficult! How hard is it to make one and how long does it take?

I agree they do look difficult, especially if the first temari you see are made by artists, rather than the more common folk-craft style. In the classes I teach to beginners, I always look for that moment where the group gives a big collective sigh— “this one’s easy!” If you start with a good foundation of basic techniques and stitches, temari stitching is easy. There are so many beginner patterns and it is those simple designs that just “pop.” They are truly eye-catching. There is a vast range in difficulty level among the designs. Like any other craft, you just need to start with the basics and work your way up at your own pace.

It should take less than 15 minutes to wrap a ball if you use the power wrapping technique I describe in my book. Marking guidelines on a beginner ball will take another 15 minutes or so. As for how long it takes to stitch each ball, you just need to look at how many stitches there are. The more stitches, the long it will take you. The easiest wrapped design might take 15 minutes. I can spend days on a very advanced ball.

Can a novice, with no sewing experience whatsoever, make a temari ball?

YES! I know many wonderful temari stitchers who have never done embroidery or sewing. The needle you use is a larger darning needle and the thread is perle cotton #5 – fairly thick. So stitching temari does not require super fine sewing skills. Children love it as well.

What do you use temari for when they are finished? Do you ever sell them?

I've found some glass containers that I fill with temari. One very large, tall one in my dining room holds about 30 balls. That gives a very nice vertical accent to the room since the container sits on top of a bar. It's also been fun collecting large flat bowls for displaying temari. And, of course, our Christmas tree almost became a "temari tree" one year! The balls make great holiday gifts, too.

I have sold a few temari, but I prefer to keep them to light a fire under other people who are interested in stitching their own. Digging through a large bin full of temari in a class is great fun. Each ball is unique and it doesn't take beginners long to see how to figure out the patterns.

What is inside a temari ball? Where do I find the materials to make one? Are the materials expensive?

That's the fun part. You can put almost anything you want inside a temari and I've heard of some pretty crazy experiments. Temari has been a craft of recycling from the outset when the first balls were made with scraps from kimono. My favorite core is made with a jingle bell and some beads inside a couple of bottle caps, taped together. Then I gather up a fist full of thread scraps, wrap them around the rattle, wrap that with baby yarn and then with serger thread. So, I'd say definitely look for things leftover from other projects to recycle into a temari ball. They are usually stitched with perle cotton which can be picked up at most craft stores quite inexpensively. My book includes a list of sources and materials.

Any interesting stories to tell? I'm never shy about opening up my temari box and stitching in public. When I've stitched in airports, it never fails that at least one and usually several folks will come up and ask, "What in the world is that and what do you do with it?" Sometimes a Japanese person will look at the ball with amazement, recalling having one as a child. One lady told me she always thought her temari was wrapped entirely with thread all the way through. She didn't know it is actually possible to make one yourself.

How can I learn more? Can I take a class? I've put a large section on my website titled Temari Resources and encourage you to check that out. We put a guide for temari teachers in Japanese Temari and I really hope to see many more classes popping up around the country. I'm thrilled to be working with the Embroiders' Guild of America (EGA) to teach intermediate and advanced classes in September 2008, at their national seminar. And I've just begun writing a correspondence course for the EGA so if you can't find a teacher near you, your group can take a long-distance lesson from me.

What are you working on next? My goal for the rest of this year is to get the EGA classes well in hand. I'm designing new temari and writing up a new pattern for each class, so that takes a lot of time. I'd also like to write some patterns for sale on my website. What I really need to do, is just to stitch! I need to keep improving my own skills and there are so many temari I want to make.

What advice do you have for a first-time temari enthusiast? The main thing is to drop any tendencies you may have towards perfectionism. After all, temari is a folk-craft. Its appeal is color and character even if there are flaws. If you jump ahead to advanced patterns before spending plenty of time making beginner temari, you are likely to be disappointed. So take your time—and have fun!

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