

# the Whitworth

## Audio Descriptions transcript

April 2021

### AUDIO DESCRIPTIONS

Audio descriptions of artworks from the collection of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester.



**AUDIO DESCRIPTION 5: Unattributed. Resist dyed obi sample. Japanese. C.1900-1929. Japan. ©The Whitworth, The University of Manchester**

**All of the Audio Descriptions are available to listen to at:**

<https://aplacebetweenthetrees.com/audio-description/>

### Social tags:

**Instagram** – @whitworthart

**Twitter** – @whitworthart

**Hashtag** – #WhitworthAudioDescriptions #TheWhitworthAtHome  
#GalleryInThePark

**Unattributed. Resist dyed obi sample. Japanese. C.1900-1929. Japan.**

**T.2000.175.**

This obi sample is not currently on display in our gallery spaces. A rectangular cloth sample, it measures just over half a metre tall and roughly 35cms wide and is comprised of a cotton crepe.

Against a warm, inky almost black background a spiral of off-white hemp leaves begins close to the lower corner on our left. The first few leaves are quite small but they gradually increase in size, as if we were looking down on them. It appears as if the larger leaves were being lifted upwards by a gust of wind. The hemp leaves are a simple, uneven eight-pointed star shape but they are layered over one another. The hemp leaf in front of the first leaf in the spiral sits slightly over the first and so on as the spiral continues.

The leaves are decorated only with sparse, dark singular veins. Simple lines begin at a point roughly in the centre of the main body of each leaf. One thin simple line stretches along the centre of each tendril of the odd, uneven star shape of each hemp leaf. Some of these details are obscured by a layering effect of one leaf on top of another.

The pattern is beautiful in its simplicity and the layering effect is deceptively simple. This makes the leaves appear more complex than they actually are; as

if they were almost indistinguishable from one another like piled autumnal leaves.

This spiral of many hemp leaves is so vigorous; it appears to grow out of control. The leaves appear to be blown off the piece. They increase in size as the pattern cuts off at the bottom of the piece after the first swirl in the spiral, which stretches out to our right and downwards. This first swirl ends abruptly only to emerge again and bend upwards in an arc to our left, as if blown by the wind before. This is cut off again at the edge on our left, towards the middle of the piece.

Again an arc of hemp leaves emerges, rising upwards from the bottom of the obi sample to our right. Some leaves are partially cut off at the bottom edge to our right before whole leaves burst back onto the piece. This part of the pattern arches upwards and over to our left. This particular curve of leaves stretches in a wide arc around the first part of the hemp leaf spiral. It is separated by a narrow arc of the lovey warm inky background before it, too, is cut off again at the edge to our left. It cuts off just above the widest part of the first curve in this spiral pattern.

Again the leaves appear to be blown back onto the obi. This time they are just below the uppermost corner to our right, until they reach the top edge of the fabric and disappear from view. This line of leaves appears to be almost

separate from the rest of the spiral pattern in that it is cut off so abruptly. This makes it appear inorganic compared to the rest of the pattern. It sharply bisects the warm background in the uppermost corner to our right. This may have been part of a much larger spiral of leaves before this sample of fabric was cut off from the larger piece of fabric it was once part of.

This fabric sample is a sample of fabric intended to be worn as an obi; a wide, fabric sash worn around the waist by men and women who wear traditional Japanese clothing. This particular fabric sample dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; around 1900- 1929. This places it in either the Taishō period (which began in 1912 when Emperor Taishō ascended the throne and ended in 1926) or the Shōwa period (which began in 1926 when Emperor Hirohito began his reign and ended in 1989.) The pattern on this obi sample was achieved by resist dyeing the fabric; something was used to cover part of the fabric and protect that area from being dyed in order to create a pattern. The rest of the fabric, the background if you will, was dyed with traditional dyes made from indigo. Indigo has been used to dye fabric in Japan for centuries.

For this particular piece, a stencil of hemp leaves appears to have been painted on to the fabric in order to preserve the original, off-white colour there. A similar combination of fabric coloured with dark indigo dyes and the use of something off-white are often found in *sashiko*. *Sashiko* is a simplistic form of

embroidery which achieves complex looking geometric patterns. It was traditionally used for the purpose of mending and strengthening fabric. In *sashiko* it is the thread which is often off-white. Indigo was one of the colours commoners were traditionally allowed to wear under Japan's old sumptuary laws.

Hemp fibre or *asa* was used to make cloth before Japan began to utilise cotton more. Hemp leaves are associated with growth and a geometric star-like pattern of hemp leaves or *asa no ha* is sometimes associated with children.