

CHIRIMEN BAGS
by
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Chirimen bags or pouches are tiny whimsical bags, often shaped like birds, flowers, or insects, which were traditionally made from scraps of chirimen, the silk used to make kimonos. The art of making chirimen bags was nearly lost during the last century. Up until the 1920's, chirimen bags continued to be made from scraps of silk, but as Japan became more and more westernized, fewer traditional kimonos were made and the supply of chirimen scraps nearly disappeared. Inoue Shigeyoshi, the founder of the Japan Toy Museum, began collecting the remaining chirimen bags in the 1970's. By 1994, his museum had a collection of 300 old chirimen pouches and 1,000 replicas. He also reprinted a book of chirimen bag patterns and began classes in the art of making chirimen bags at his museum, a practice which continues today.

A similar tradition can be found in European history, although not to the same extent as was common in Japan. For example, a needlecase from the early 17th century, in the shape of a frog (complete with a pouch), is in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a modern reproduction of it can be seen at <http://www.extremecostuming.com/reproductions/frogneedlecase.html>.

Although traditionally made from scraps of silk, contemporary chirimen bags can be made from nearly any fabrics including cottons, linens, and rayon. There are a number of pattern books available (see references) including one by Kumiko Sudo, a contemporary Japanese quiltmaker. The fish chirimen bag (instructions below) is from Kumiko's book. Many of the traditional patterns are quite complex and can be very challenging to make. Others, like the fish, are only moderately difficult and some of them, like the Chrysanthemum (used for the favor at Coronation this year) and the Daffodil are very easy to do and can be made in a couple of hours.

Unfortunately, some of the older patterns have been lost, but there are plenty of others available including songbirds, chickens, bunnies, cicadas, butterflies, lots of different fish, and many, many different flowers, vegetables, and fruits. Some of the most popular patterns continue to be those of Japanese babies and children at play or dressed in traditional costumes. Many of these patterns can be found in the books listed below or a search on the Internet using "chirimen pouch" or "chirimen bag" will turn up lots more (and lots of pretty pictures to look at). It is also fun to convert some of the traditional patterns into other designs. For instance, the traditional cicada pattern can be converted into a bumblebee by modifying the wings and using an appropriate fabric.

References

Ruyak, Jacqueline, Nov.-Dec. 1994. *Scraps of Silk, Bags of Whimsy: Japanese Chirimen Bags*

Ruyak, Jacqueline, Nov.-Dec. 1994. *Chirimen Bags to Sew*

Sudo, Kumiko, 2001. *Omiyage: Handmade Gifts from Fabric in the Japanese Tradition*, Contemporary Books, Chicago, Illinois, USA. ISBN: 0-8092-2909-9

Websites:

Japan Toy Museum: <http://www.japan-toy-museum.org/english/eindex.htm>

The Japan Toy Museum sells (via their website) several chirimen books (all are in Japanese, but are lavishly illustrated with step-by-step photos for all projects) including Fun with Cloth: Chirimen Pouches, Fun with Chirimen Pouches Through the Seasons, and Easy to Make Traditional Chirimen Pouches.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art (link to frog needlecase):

<http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=96600;type=101>

Link to modern reproduction of frog needlecase:

<http://www.extremecostuming.com/reproductions/frogneedlecase.html>

Directions to make the Japanese Fish Bag

This is a modern version of the traditional Japanese goldfish bag. At the next Crown War, there will be a class in how to make this pattern. If you are interested, please bring 1/8 yd. each of two different fabrics (one for the main bag, one for the lining). Cottons and cotton/polyesters are both fine for this. Satins, crushed panne, and velveteens also work, but they are slippery and more difficult to stitch. Also, please bring sewing supplies (matching threads, pins, needles, scissors, etc). I will bring copies of the pattern pieces and also copies of the instructions. If you want to start early, this pattern is from Kumiko Sudo's book (p. 102-103 and 144-145). Good luck!

Materials required:

Assorted fabrics for body, fins, tail, base, bag lining, and hems: each piece 1/8 yard (15 cm) or less

Black and white felt scraps for eyes OR two beads or buttons for eyes

Two 16" (40 cm) [or longer—see section on drawstrings below] ribbons or drawstrings or one 21"-22" piece of ribbon or drawstring (satin or rattail cord works really well for this)

2-3 decorative beads or fabric scraps to make two fabric beads

Matching threads, needles, pins, scissors

Safety pin (for threading the drawstring through the casing)

All seams are 1/4 inch (0.75 cm) unless otherwise noted

Using Pattern A (fish body), cut two from patterned fabric and two from plain fabric (for lining). Transfer pattern markings to fabric (eye position, fin position, seam lines).

Right sides together, stitch anterior (front) side seam only. Turn right side out. Now you are

ready to make the fins and eyes and attach them to the body.

Fins

Using Pattern B (fin), cut four fins, reversing the pattern for two of them. Right sides together, stitch first fin, leaving short straight end open. Clip curves, trim seams, and turn fin right side out. Fold under seam allowance along opening and press (finger-press is OK). Slip-stitch opening closed. Repeat for second fin. Stitch fins into position on body, stitching along slip-stitched end of fin only.

Eyes

Cut out eyes from scraps of black and white felt, stitch black center to white outer eye and then stitch each eye into position on the body.

OR

If using beads or buttons for eyes, stitch them into place on the body.

Once fins and eyes are attached, turn the body inside out (right sides together) and stitch the posterior (back) side seam.

Using Pattern C, cut two tail pieces. Right sides together, stitch around the sides and three points of the tail, but leave the short flat side unstitched. Clip angles and curves, trim seams and then turn right side out.

Using Pattern D, cut one bag base from patterned fabric and one from plain fabric (for the lining). Using the patterned base piece (not the lining piece), pin the tail into position on the right side (and pin the tail points out of the way so they don't get caught in the seam). Baste just within the seam line in order to keep the tail from slipping while sewing the body to the base. Right sides together, stitch base to body along the bottom seam line of the body. Turn right side out, check to be sure that the tail is in the proper position and is firmly secured at the base.

To make the lining, place the lining body pieces right sides together and stitch the side seams. Right sides together, stitch the base lining to the body lining along the bottom seam line. Wrong sides together, place the completed lining inside the fish body. Stitch lining to fish body around the top edge (stitch line is 1/4" down from the top edge).

Top casing for the drawstrings:

Cut one piece of fabric (3" x 4.5"). Fold in half lengthwise and then cut into two pieces, each 1.5" x 4.5 inches. Fold over and hem the short ends of each piece. Right sides together (right side of casing to right side of fish), position each piece on to top edge of fish, taking care not to overlap the edges of the two casing pieces. The drawstring works best when the casing edges meet on the sides of the fish.

Using the previous seam as a guide, stitch the casing to the fish bag around the top edge of the fish, 1/4" down from the top (stitch just to the outside of the previous seam). Then fold over and hem the unattached long side of each casing, fold the casing over and secure (using an overcast stitch) the hemmed long edge to the inside of the fish, just covering the previous seam line. Attach a safety pin to one end of each drawstring and thread it through the casing. Pull bag closed and tie drawstring into a bow.

Drawstrings:

For purely decorative effects, two 16" pieces of ribbon or drawstring will work, but for a functional bag which opens and closes easily, it is best to use a much longer length. Use long pieces of cord or ribbon that each will wrap around at least one and a half times the diameter of the casings and leave tails of the desired length. This allows you to open and close the bag easily. Alternatively, a single drawstring 21"-22" long, wrapped 1 and 1/2 times through the casing will also work. Although ribbons look very nice on the fish, cords are much easier to pull open and closed. The ribbons tend to get hung up and don't pull smoothly.

Beads:

I use several beads at the end of each drawstring. When selecting beads, be sure that they will fit onto the ribbon or cord which you will use as the drawstring. Thread the beads onto the drawstring and then knot the end to keep the beads from slipping off. If the bag will be used a lot, make a double knot at the end for extra security. To keep the beads from moving around on the drawstring, I also make a knot right at the end of the beads on the side closer to the bag (the proximal side).

Fabric beads also look nice at the ends of the drawstrings. Directions for making them are on pages xvii-xviii in Kumiko Sudo's book.