For The Love of Temari

Martine Roovers, AWA Vienna, is a Temari artist. She tells us about her creative upbringing, how art became her lifeline during grief and her three decade love affair with Japanese Temari art.

Martine Roovers

An Imaginative Youth

I I grew up on the outskirts of Antwerp, Belgium, in a quiet neighborhood where creativity was part of daily life. My first encounters with creativity came through my mother, who was both a milliner and a florist. She treated every birthday as a full artistic project. Each year had a different theme and she transformed our house into a small fantasy world. She designed costumes, invented games and built decorations with her own hands. It never felt like a party, it felt like entering another universe.

Summers with my grandmother were just as magical. She helped us build a “fairy tale garden” behind her house. We made giant toadstools by pouring concrete into molds, and there was even a little gingerbread house for us to play in. No idea was ever too strange. Once, we found old black electrical cables, braided them into long ropes and tied them to our heads as hair. Instead of laughing at us, both my mother and grandmother encouraged our imagination.

Learning and Teaching

During secondary school, I completed a three-year art program at the Drawing Academy in Antwerp. This experience gave me a strong foundation in visual expression and nurtured my passion for creativity. After graduating, I continued my education and completed my degree as a primary school teacher, followed later by

Temari Balls

the opportunity to establish a youth art studio, where students could explore their creativity during free Wednesday afternoons. This project showed me how meaningful and inspiring creative environments can be for young people.

I also worked for six years as a creative arts teacher in the neuropsychiatric department of a children's hospital. There, I witnessed how artistic activities can support emotional development and contribute to healing processes. This experience strengthened my belief that creativity is not only a form of expression, but also a powerful therapeutic tool that can open new paths to personal growth and recovery.

Art as Solace

At the age of twenty-five I married, believing my life had found a clear and joyful direction. Five years later I became a widow, and everything changed abruptly. During the long and painful process of coping with grief, visits to museums, concerts and art exhibitions became my quiet lifelines. These moments of beauty were small points of light that helped me continue living when hope seemed distant.

New Beginnings in Prague and Vienna

Several years later, I met my present husband who was living in Frankfurt at the time. After our wedding, we moved to Prague where we lived for ten years. There, I taught Dutch at the International School and became a member of the International Women's Association of Prague (IWAP) for which I organized a series of lectures called the "Czech Studies Series." In those early years after the 1989 Revolution, doors were wide open to foreigners. Distinguished professors and the Minister of the Environment accepted our invitations. We were even received at the Presidential Palace – experiences I will never forget.

In 2002, we moved to Austria. After living in Vienna for three years, we decided to settle in the countryside outside of Vienna. We have been enjoying our retirement in this peaceful rural setting for several years now.

Previous page, top to bottom:
A Temari accompanies me everywhere.
"Retirement Temari" for all the colleagues at school.
Living in Prague (Czech Republic) with my husband Karel

This page, top to bottom:
second hobby bookbinding, Japanese embroidery stitches always pop up;
work in progress

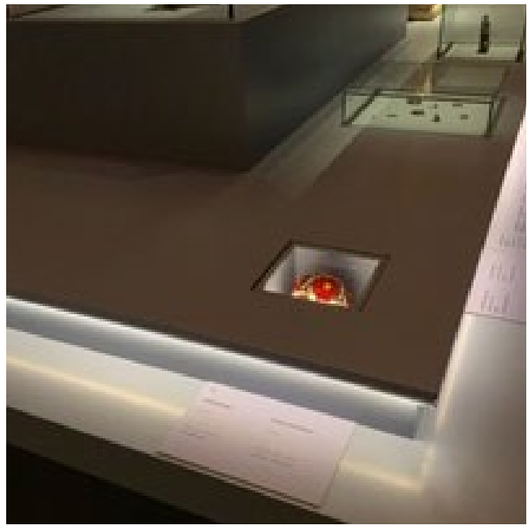
Discovering Temari Balls

I have worked with textiles my entire life. I always had some kind of handwork project at hand; it was my way to relax. In the 1990s, textile crafts went out of fashion, but I discovered by coincidence a Temari ball at a friend's home (she had lived in Japan). The colors and geometric structure immediately fascinated me. I soon realized that there was very little information available, both on the internet and in books. I immersed myself into research and eventually succeeded in making my first Temari. Over the past thirty years, I have devoted myself almost exclusively to this craft and have developed a solid expertise.

The Making of A Temari (Japanese for handball)

This originally embroidered play ball for children, tied together from remnants of old kimonos and wrapped with a silk thread, is currently experiencing its renaissance. The Temari ball is a Japanese symbol of perfection and has been made for almost 1400 years. It is a gift of joy and happiness.

It is sometimes referred to as "mother love balls" by older Japanese. Traditionally, children received shimmering, colorful Temari balls from their parents on New Year's Day, which were considered gifts of love, deep friendship and loyalty.



This page, left to right:
Temari Workshop at the AWA Clubhouse;
Creative work with children;
Christmas Temari

Next page, top to bottom:
As part of the exhibition "Higher Powers" at the *Kunsthistorisches* Museum (2020) Vienna, one of my Temari balls found its place.
flower meadow pattern;
Camelia Temari that was exhibited for several years at the *Kunsthistorisches* Museum in Vienna.
various examples of Chrysanthemum, a classic pattern for Temari

The ball is formed by hand. A bag filled with rice hulls forms the body. If you want to add sound, a bell is placed inside. The wrapping then begins. Wool is used first to place a layer underneath, then you change to colored sewing thread made of polyester to get a beautiful shine, before starting the embroidery. This creates colorful geometric figures inspired by nature (triangles, diamonds, stars, abstract flowers, etc.). The embroidery technique came to Japan from China in the seventh century.

Ladies from the upper class made the balls as a pastime and competed with each other to see who could embroider the most beautiful Temari ball, embroidered with shiny cotton. The process is very time-consuming. If one wants to embroider a Temari all around, the sphere must first be measured to calculate the pattern exactly. With the help of paper strips and relational geometry, the ball is divided into segments or polygons.

Temari Patterns

Temari patterns carry symbolic meaning rooted in Japanese tradition. Common motifs are:

- *Asanoha* (Hemp Leaf): Strength and growth. It is given to children for health and resilience.
- *Kikkō* (Tortoise Shell/Hexagon): Longevity and protection. Associated with endurance.
- *Seigaiha* (Blue Ocean Waves): Peace and stability. Reflects hope for a calm life.
- *Sakura* (Cherry Blossom): Beauty and transience. Reminder to value the present.
- *Kiku* (Chrysanthemum): Nobility and good fortune. Linked to the imperial family.

Spreading The Word

With my background in education, I came up with the idea of giving workshops and sharing this relatively unknown technique with others. I have now given so many workshops that a large group of Temari Talents (as we call ourselves) has formed. Making Temari is very time-consuming, but discovering the complexstructures and repetitive embroidery is still a positive, almost meditative experience for me. I think that's why so many people are immediately infected by the “Temari Virus” and want to keep learning new patterns. People often travel from as far away as from neighboring countries to attend the workshops I give in Austria. The website, my Instagram account and YouTube channel make it possible to communicate with colleagues from all over the world and exchange techniques and experiences.