

# Weaving *from the* Heart

## TERRI BIBBY'S INFECTIOUS LOVE OF THE SAORI CRAFT

By ROGER BRUNT  
Photos by Alan Bibby



Above: The Loom Dancers group of visiting weavers with their colourful SAORI pieces created at a retreat led by Terri Bibby on Salt Spring Island.

At top: Terri weaves at Southey Point. The portability of the SAORI loom is one of its advantages.

**T**he origins of the SAORI style of weaving taught on Salt Spring Island read like a Zen koan. In fact, the philosophy of Zen is central to its very existence.

The story goes like this:

Misao Jo, the founder of SAORI, decided to become a weaver when she was 57 years old. Born in 1913 in Osaka, Japan and now 102 years old, Misao began her new vocation after raising a family and teaching ikebana (Japanese flower arranging).

One day she was weaving an obi, a kimono sash, and showed it to her teacher. "This is no good," the teacher informed her. "You have made a mistake." Misao knew she had made a mistake, but she liked its effect and had intentionally not corrected it.

Thinking about what her teacher had said, she went back to her loom and made a second obi. It not only incorporated her "mistake" but repeated it over and over again. Showing this new piece of fabric to her teacher, she was told, "This is a beautiful and very original design."

And so the SAORI style was born.

Terri Bibby, of SAORI Salt Spring, explained all this to me as she demonstrated the technique on one of the looms (and even let me try it) in her north-end studio so full of multi-coloured cones of thread and swatches of hand-woven fabric it was like being in an Oriental bazaar.

Bibby has the only studio in Canada that teaches this particular style of weaving.

She told me, "SAORI is a word incorporating two Japanese words. The 'SA' of SAORI has the same meaning as the first syllable of the word 'SAI' found in Zen. It means 'Everything has its own dignity.' The



word 'ORI' means 'weaving.' To take this to its logical conclusion, in SAORI, as in life, there are no mistakes, only teachings, which is the ultimate Zen perspective."

SAORI is a style of hand weaving that emphasizes creativity and free expression. There are no rules, just an immersion into weaving and a spontaneous working with yarn and threads. This technique is meditative in nature and aims to build self discovery from the process and the resulting textiles. If this sounds



very esoteric, it's actually as simple as taking a basket of yarn and choosing the colours that appeal to you.

"In this way," Bibby says, "I believe the process is very intuitive. Many times I have watched as a weaver selects colours for the loom that are very close to the colours of the clothes they are wearing at the time. It's as if they have said to themselves without even realizing it, 'I feel red or brown or blue today.'"

Anyone can enjoy SAORI. In fact, it is said that the less you know about weaving the easier it is to explore. Even beginners can create a completely unique hand-woven textile. For this reason SAORI is practised by art therapists, in hospitals, for meditative sessions, in schools, by people with disabilities, and by textile and fashion designers worldwide. More than 40,000 people weave in the SAORI way in Japan, and SAORI has a global network of teachers, studios and authorized product dealers. Bibby is one of these.

The SAORI style of weaving came to North America in 2000. Bibby first saw it in 2005 at the Cowichan Fleece and Fiber Festival. "I had been a traditional weaver for 20 years. As soon as I saw SAORI I knew it's what I wanted to do. I came home and cut the fabric I had been working on off my loom. I just couldn't continue in my old style, and I have never gone back."

The SAORI looms are small and portable, and designed to free the hands so weavers can select colours and create patterns without having to think about the mechanics involved in the weaving process. One of the main tenets of the design of the innovative SAORI loom is to "get the loom out of the way." There are no technical things to remember and a weaver does not even have to know what a weft or a warp is. SAORI looms are unique in this way because most conventional small looms require weavers to hand operate levers for every row. SAORI looms are foot powered. Each loom uses a boat shuttle for a simple, smooth, efficient weave rhythm. Bibby chants a helpful rhyme as I try to attain this rhythm: Weave. Beat. Switch your feet. Only three simple steps to a world of possibilities.

Another thing that sets SAORI apart from other types of weaving is that it can be a social and community-building style of weaving. Because no measuring or counting is required, the weavers are free to talk and share stories as they work. One of the principles of SAORI weaving is that group members learn from each other. Bibby hosts workshops for up to 10 people (or four in her studio) and the room is often buzzing with the sounds of the looms, talking and laughter.

The textiles created on a SAORI loom can be used for clothing, bags, scarves, banners, etc. Following the "simple is better" philosophy, the idea is to have minimal waste in making garments. The fabric doesn't have to be cut, but squares and rectangles can be draped directly onto the body, then sewn into a one-of-a-kind origami-style garment. On the day I

visited Bibby she was wearing a lovely red and earth-tone top made on her SAORI loom. She told me that the process that went into the design of this piece of clothing is just as much a part of Zen as the creation of the material itself.

"When I created this piece of cloth," Bibby told me, "I really liked it but I wasn't sure what I wanted to make with it. I took it to the house where it became a wall hanging. It hung there for a full year before I knew what it wanted to be. In this way, being a SAORI designer is a bit like being a cloth whisperer."

Likewise, Bibby showed me a bag that encompassed a pair of pants for a lining, complete with pockets and draw string. "One morning I woke up and I just knew what this particular bag wanted to be," she said. "This is a completely organic process that springs from the unconscious 'with eyes that shine through beauty.'"

For those not quite as creative who need a pattern to work from, SAORI Japan has published books with clothing patterns. Any of these patterns can be adapted and modified to your own designs.

Bibby teaches SAORI workshops for all ages and retreats for adults. She uses only SAORI looms and offers students books and equipment from Japan. Every year she and her students and the public weave a long peace banner that is sent to Hiroshima for an event called SAORI Peace Weave. The one she showed me was at least 15 feet long, consisting of bands of colour that each person had created. The result is a rainbow of colours symbolizing peace and harmony.

"I have many students from as far away as Indonesia, New Zealand and all over the United States, and also from across Canada," Bibby told me. "We have a guest cottage on the property and a visit here to learn SAORI weaving is a form of retreat. Students may not realize that when





they arrive here, but they are certainly aware of it by the time they leave.”

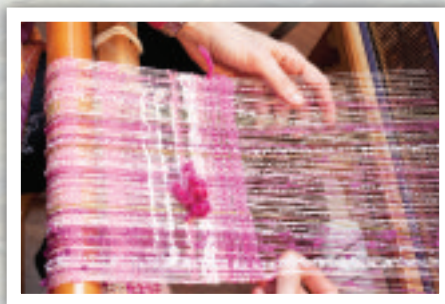
A number of workshops and retreats are coming up, with all the information available at [www.saltspringweaving.com](http://www.saltspringweaving.com).

“I love to share SAORI and let people experience the creativity themselves and make their own unique weaving.

Probably the thing that is most evident talking to Bibby about SAORI is her contagious enthusiasm for what she does. A quote from Misao Jo sums that up perfectly: “Because everything has the same life, life cannot be measured by a yardstick. It is this individuality that makes everything meaningful and the uniqueness of each thread that creates the tapestry of life.” ✨

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Above and at left: SAORI weaving samples.  
At right and below: Terri with one of  
the peace banners made as a  
community project.  
Previous page: Terri  
coaches a child  
at Ruckle Farm  
Day.

