

THE HISTORY OF THE KIMONO

"The kimono is a garment that is unique to Japan, and has become a universal symbol of beauty in Japanese culture. It is a garment made from whole widths of cloth, sewn together with a simple running stitch, wrapped around the body, and secured at the waist by a large sash." 1

Tomb figures from the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) in China wore garments that were similar to the kimono, and it is known that by the 3rd century B.C., migrants from southern and central China brought weaving techniques to Japan. These new people also spun and wove wild silk. "Japan has an indigenous silkworm that feeds on oak leaves and produces a greenish-colored cocoon that cannot be reeled off like silk of the domesticated worms, but has to be carded and spun." 2

The domesticated silkworm may have arrived with Korean refugees fleeing from the Chinese during the Han Dynasty when China invaded northern Korea and established a colony there. In the CAM collection there is a tomb figure of a kneeling woman from the Western Han dynasty. She is wearing an ancestor to the modern kimono that was probably worn by the common people for hundreds of years and perhaps as an undergarment for the ruling classes.

Perhaps because of the labor intensity required to produce textiles, the Japanese have always valued them. "Apart from warmth and personal adornment, textiles also served as offerings to the gods, and as tribute to distant Chinese emperors and to native rulers and overlords." 3 Later, textiles became a form of currency and were used to pay taxes, as gifts and rewards. It is thought that these early textiles were decorated using nature both as inspiration and to produce the dyes needed for the designs.

From the beginning, the immigrant Chinese and Korean were given a high status, forming guilds to serve the imperial court. Because of the importance of the silk and brocade weavers and the embroiderers, many were "ennobled and given grants of land. Fashion was a notable beneficiary." 4

Prince Shotoku (574-622) established a system of court rankings and "each rank was identified by the color of its particular cap, based on the five colors of the Chinese spectrum: . . . blue, red, yellow, white, and black." 5 Caps were later changed to black and purple was added. Each rank had an upper and lower grade, represented by a lighter or darker shade of each color (6 colors/12 ranks). Each color represented a virtue: "purple (virtue), blue (human excellence), red (decorum), yellow (integrity), white (righteousness), and black (wisdom).

Even today specific colors are reserved for specific court ranks. The emperor's official robe is brownish yellow, which represents the sun at noon. His heir, the crown prince, wears orange because he is the rising sun, and all younger princes wear yellow. Other ranks in the court hierarchy adhere to established colors for their official robes." 6

In 711, trained weavers were sent into the countryside to teach patterned weaving techniques. Soon peasant weavers were producing both brocade and figured twill. It was at this time that the court copied the fashions from the Tang Dynasty in China and issued an order that the clothing must be folded with the left side over the right side across the front of the body." 7 Also recorded in this period is the name KESODE, meaning a garment with small sleeves. The kesode was similar to a Chinese coat in that it was made from two lengths of cloth, stitched together down the back and left open in front, with extra widths sewn on to

lengthen the sleeves and create a comfortable overlap. When the Japanese finally rejected Chinese fashion in the tenth century, they quit wearing their hair up in topknots and reverted to wearing their hair loose. This long flowing style lasted until the hair was put in again in a sculptured style in the 17th century.

During the Heian period (794-1185) it was fashionable at court to wear many layers of unlined clothing (anywhere from 15 to 40). Today several layers are “still worn at court for ceremonial occasions such as weddings or coronations, but the number of layers has been reduced to a more manageable five.”⁸ Underneath the layers was the kesode, probably knee length, made of fine white silk (or red, which was thought to have medicinal properties) and was tucked into a loose divided skirt or a pair of pleated, baggy trousers, called the HAKAMA. The lined outer garments were called UCHIKI. High bred women were forbidden to show their faces to any man except their master, husband or lover and fashionable women began to hide their faces behind painted fans (KICHO). It is probably because of this taboo that artists of the period depicted beautiful women with rather stylized faces.

Another fashion change was that both women and men began to use a cosmetic over their faces that was imported from China; it contained mercury chloride and white lead. The lips were colored with rouge and the teeth were blackened. (The practice of whitening the face and blackening the teeth continued in parts of Japan until the 1920s.) Heian women also shaved their eyebrows and painted false eyebrows high on the forehead to produce a look of surprise. Most of these fashionable conventions were originally due to Chinese influence over 1200 years ago. The Japanese culture is resistant to change and still retains elements of these customs.

A very charming practice in the Heian court was the “next morning letter”. It was expected that after spending a night of lovemaking, a gentleman would express his thanks by sending his lover a poem. The poem was expected to be written on beautiful, handmade paper and tied with a lovely flower. If a man wanted to end a relationship, no letter or poem would be sent. In the 17th and 18th centuries, this practice was revived. After spending the night with a courtesan, a man was expected to send her a note of thanks. The romantic customs of the Heian nobility remain a source of inspiration and “even today ‘GENJI taste’ motivates artists, writers and textiles designers. The Heian period was the seminal period for the Japanese.”⁹

Shaded dyeing began during this period. The color begins as a pale tint at the top, gradually becoming a darker shade at the hem. Colors were thought to have spiritual associations and were chosen within the conventions of rank and season. A record of the Heian court’s production of the dyes and mordants was ordered by the emperor, which is how many of these methods are used today to make clothing for the current imperial court.

During the period of the rise of the samurai (Kamakura 1185-1333), women’s fashions became simplified. All the outer layers were gradually discarded, leaving the undergarment, the kesode, which developed into the kimono of today. The kesode was worn with a narrow sash and covered with one of two uchiki robes. The outer robes were always more richly decorated with embroideries featuring favorable symbols. For example, pine trees, plum blossoms and bamboo represented fortitude. Flying cranes and the hexagonal shapes are symbols of long life.

“The sleeves of the original kesode had either been tubular, narrow at the wrist like a western jacket sleeve, or else folded in such a way that kept this narrow wrist opening, but incorporated a triangular underarm section for more freedom of movement.”¹⁰ The small sleeved kosode evolved into a full-length robe in the Kamakura period, became the gloriously decorated garment of the 15-16th century and is the robe we know today as the kimono.

Zen priests, emigrating from China to escape the invading Mongols brought with them black ink painting (SUMI-E) that was also used to decorate the kimono. This was also when “The Way of Tea” (CHADO) became part of the Japanese culture and would influence fashion as well.

The Ashikaga clan assumed control in 1336 and established many of the traditional Japanese arts: the stately NOH drama and its comic partner KYOGEN, as well as the tea ceremony, monochrome ink painting (sumi-e), formalized flower arranging (IKEBANA), and landscape gardening.” 11 For all this lavish entertaining, guests from the noble and samurai classes spent fortunes on beautiful clothing. Trade with China resumed and woven brocades, velvet, damask, embroideries and fine silks were available. A new garment was created from the old uchiki robe and the kimono. It had a longer neckband, but the same small sleeves and was worn like a cloak with the top worn a bit off the shoulders and then held closed with a hand. The name of this new garment was the UCHIKAKE or outer robe. The uchikake became very popular with the wealthy ruling classes of the Edo period (1615 – 1868) and were usually red, black or white with lavish decoration. Today the uchikake is part of modern bridal outfits.

“Fashion in Japan has a curious way of filtering upward, and at the end of the Muromachi (1392-1568), a time of turbulent civil war when old traditions and class distinctions were overturned, the warrior classes began decorating their kimonos with bold naturalistic designs” like the commoners. 12 After Kyoto was ransacked and the weaving industry dispersed, a new decorative trend emerged. Resist and stencil dyeing soon flowered into one of the greatest of all the Japanese textile arts. The new paste-resist process was called YUZEN-Zome, named for a famous fan painter. “A design would be drawn in a soluble vegetable dye on a garment that had been temporarily stitched together (necessary because the design needed to flow across the seams). It would be then unpicked after the drawing was complete and tightened over bamboo stretchers. The lines of the drawing were then covered with a thin coating of paste pushed through a paper cone attached to a fine metal nozzle. Once the paste had hardened, the craftsman was able to paint directly onto the cloth without fear that the pigments would bleed into each other. It was a process that allowed an unlimited number of colors to be used, and it made it possible to create complex pictorial designs that previously could only be achieved by embroidery. The background of a yuzen-dyed kimono was brushed on rather than dip-dyed and having been steamed to set the dye, the painted cloth was rinsed in water to remove the paste.” 13

In the 15th century, Kyoto was destroyed during a civil war, but even after the city was rebuilt and the weavers reestablished, tie-dyeing (another very popular resist process) was still very fashionable. Japanese tie-dyeing is called SHIBORI from the verb SHIBORU, meaning “to squeeze.” “The most common forms are stitch-resist and pinch-dyeing. . . . Stitch-dyeing involves stitching around the area and pulling the threads tight before covering the fabric with some kind of waterproof wrapping to prevent the penetration of the dye. Pinch-dyeing involves pinching and binding off tiny sections of the cloth to create a pattern. In both methods, the areas reserved retain the original color of the cloth”. 14 The CAM 19th century purple kimono (#1964.780) is an example of pinch-dyeing. Often the kimono was decorated by combining several processes such as embroidery, tie-dyeing and black ink painting.

The Japanese love of asymmetry can be considered as an appreciation of the imperfect. Imperfection is reflected in Buddhist thought concerning the impermanence of life, everything dies and decays and thus life is constantly changing and rearranging itself.

When the Portuguese arrived in 1498 they brought with them velvet, wool, dyed and printed cottons from India and silk tapestry weaves from Persia. The fabrics were quite costly

so the fabric was divided into rather small pieces which could be used to cover and wrap utensils used in the tea ceremony for example. Another use of the precious fabric was the patchwork kimono presented to a famous general made of pieces donated by his friends. Patchwork symbolized longevity in that as the small pieces together extended the life of all the patches, the hope was that the life of the wearer would also be extended.

During the Edo period(1615-1868), wealth continued to be flaunted by fashion. The ruling shogun (military dictator) established a new capital at Edo (present day Tokyo) and the weavers and embroiderers left Kyoto and followed their new patrons. During these first years of the 17th century, the kimono was covered with complex designs. The new style was called JI-NASHI, which means “kimono with no blank space.” However, another style emerged which incorporated the concept of MA or “blank space.” The change may have been as the result of the fires in Edo in 1657 and Kyoto in 1661. The simpler designs on the kimonos were easier to produce. Perhaps it was because it became fashionable to emphasize the beautiful fabrics with an asymmetrical design.

The newly rich merchants class copied the fashions of the ruling classes, causing the government to regulate the color and style of decoration of the merchants' kimonos. A clever merchant's wife might show her husband's wealth by having a kimono made that was covered in an all-over pinch-dyed design – very simple but costly to produce. This type is called KANOKO-SHIBORI, kanoko meaning “fawn dot.” The design was applied with a stencil, with dots to represent the pinches. With the dots as a guide, the kanoko pinches would be created by tying tiny knots bound with hemp string, usually over minute nails. This which was very time consuming. When dyed, the fabric under the string retained the original color of the fabric. But undoing the knots was even worse, for the threads had to be cut without cutting the textured fabric.

It was in this period that four rigid class systems were formed: samurai, farmers, artisans and merchants. Outside these classes were The Floating World (UKIYO): actors, courtesans and entertainers; and the untouchables (night soil collectors and those who buried the dead). Clothing reflected each of the classes and fashion flourished.

A high ranking courtesans could select her customers, and love affairs and “next morning” letters were part of this licensed “Willow World.” A great spectacle was a procession of high-class courtesans moving through the streets, followed by child attendants. Lower ranking prostitutes were engaged through tea houses or were chosen by someone looking at the women through the barred windows of their rooms. It was common for rural families to sell their daughters to a tea house for a period of time, perhaps ten years. Modern survivors of this era were the GEISHA who were never prostitutes, but were hired to entertain in tea houses or brothels. A record of the “Willow World” is found in the woodblock prints (ukiyo-e) that were made during this time.

The earliest promoters of fashion were the peddlers, traveling around the country with fabric, news and the latest gossip. Soon, the rich merchants in the cities demanded more sophisticated sources. As a result, the drapers' stores began to offer a variety of goods. Weavers, embroiderers, dyers and seamstresses began working together, very much like the modern department store. In addition, the publishers issued pattern books (HINAGATA), one to a page and printed by the woodblock method. Often the patterns made reference to ancient classics, such as THE TALE OF THE GENJI. Famous artists were commissioned to paint original works of art on the kimonos of very rich customers. It was also at this time commoners were finally allowed to use umbrellas.

Soon all the fashion excesses resulted in the sumptuary edicts in the Ban of Tenna in 1682 and 1683. But people found ways of getting around the government and the edicts were eventually abandoned. New and even more expensive techniques of resist dyeing were discovered. The fashion for narrow sashes died out after Kabuki actors began wearing wide, stiffened sashes made from brocades and tied in elaborate knots.

Courtesans often tied their obis in front, perhaps because they were quicker and easier to undo. Both married and unmarried women tied their obis in back with a variety of bows. However, after the obi took the place of the sash, the design of the kimono had to change. All over designs were smaller and when large pictorial designs were used there was a space left in the middle. By the 19th century, it was the fashion to restrict the large patterns to the hem area, leaving the rest of the kimono relatively plain.

Following the eruption of Mt. Fuji in 1707, there were a series of other disasters, resulting in a weakened economy. The sumptuary laws of 1724 regulated not only fashion but also furniture, gifts, and bedding. Hairdressers were told to find other jobs because women were expected to do their own hair. Cotton was now an important part of the economy and so cotton became the most fashionable fabric. Soon however, drab garments were lined with forbidden silks and the underkimono might be of a brilliant design.

Samurai uniforms had traditionally been dyed with very small all-over patterns called KOMON, created using stencils. Because these tiny designs suited the conservative mood of the country, they now became the fashion for all the classes. The rice paste resist and the strong handmade paper for the stencils were unique to Japan. The stencils were cut the same width as the cloth which is no more than 14" and the average length needed for a kimono is about 13 1/2 yards. One stencil will last long enough to dye ten full lengths of cloth, so 5-10 stencils are cut at a time. A master dyer can dye fabric for a kimono with a different pattern for each side. The indigo blue and white cotton summer kimono is the only kimono that is still worn by both men and women in Japan today, and is called YUKATA.

By the mid 19th century, most cotton fabrics worn by fashionable society were woven by peasants working in small but well organized groups. The most popular patterns were stripes, checks and plaids. Plain cotton was woven for the komon. The merchants decided on the patterns and then placed orders with the weavers. A resist technique was done by the peasants for their own use, called TSUTSUGAKI or "tube drawing". A cone filled with rice paste was used like a paint brush to make free hand drawings and designs. Some of this fabric was used for kimonos, but most was used for bedding and wrapping cloths. This is a simpler version of the yuzen-dyed process.

Another successful country textile is the KASURI which is both woven and resist-dyed and is popular still today. The kasuri technique originated in India and is known there as ikat. The design that results has a slight, blurred edge.

Commodore Matthew Perry reached Japan in 1854 and the period of isolation was over and western ideas began to influence fashion. "... many of the so called New Women, settled for a fashion worn by the empress: hakama trousers worn over kimono, together with high button boots and (most prestigious of all) a silk umbrella imported from France." By this time, the hakama was a skirt and no longer divided. In 1873 it was reported that the empress began to let her eyebrows grow back and to quit blackening her teeth. In 1886, the empress appeared in public in Western clothing for the first time. She was quoted the next year with regard to the new clothing styles, but said to "be especially careful to use materials made in our own country. . . (which) will aid the advancement of art and cause business to flourish". 15 Currently, the

furisode worn with the hakama is often worn by girls and young women for graduation ceremonies.

In 1871, some weavers were sent to Lyon, France, to study the Jacquard loom. The Japanese copied it and 6 years later there was a fair to demonstrate not only the looms but also the fabrics that were being produced. Another change during the last half of the 19th century was the use of modern chemical (aniline) dyes which created a much wider variety of colors available for the fabrics used to make the kimonos. Kimono dyed with a aniline dye has deeper, darker colors.

Currently, the kimono has mostly a ceremonial role in the culture of Japan. There are several kinds of kimono, for example: an informal kimono, is called a komon (after the all-over patterning); the long dropped-sleeve kimono is referred to as the FURISODE, which means "swinging sleeves." But regardless of the descriptive names, the kimono is always recognized as being uniquely Japanese.

This research was collected for docent training for the Public Spectacles Private Pleasures exhibit at the Cincinnati Art Museum in the fall of 2006. Prints #15, 16, and 17 in the exhibit have an interesting design on the kimonos. It is a former imperial insignia of a PAULOWNIA. This symbol, which is reminiscent of Whistler's butterfly signature, is defined as: 1. a tree, Paulownia tomentosa of Japan, having pale violet or blue flowers blooming in early spring; 2. any other tree of the genus Paulownia, named after Anna Paulovna, daughter of Paul I (1754-1801), Emperor of Russia (1796-1801).

FOOTNOTES

All pages refer to THE STORY OF THE KIMONO, Jill Liddell, E.F. Hutton, NY, 1989

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GLOSSARY FOR THE BIJINGA PRINTS

FURISODE is a kimono with long, swinging sleeves

HAKAMA refers to a pleated, divided skirt or full-cut trousers

JI-NASHI is a kimono with no blank spaces; MA is a kimono with blank spaces

KANOKO-SHIBORI Kanoko means "fawn dot" and the dots are applied with stencils and then pinch-dyed.

KASURI is fabric that is woven and resist-dyed

KOSODE is a garment with “small sleeves” and later that same garment is what is now called a kimono

KOMON refers to a small, all-over pattern

KYOGEN is a comic play performed between the acts of a NOH drama.

OBI refers to a wide sash

SUMI-E refers to black-ink printing

UCHIKI is a lined outer garment; UCHIKAKE is the same robe tailored a bit differently

UKIYO refers to “The Floating World”; UKIYO-E are the woodblock prints of the UKIYO
THE FLOATING WORLD consists of actors, courtesans and entertainers

TSUTSUGAKI means “tube drawing”

YUKATA refers to the indigo blue and white cotton kimono worn by both men and women today

YUZEN is a resist process for dyeing

Additional notes pertinent to the Bijinga prints in the exhibit:

Because Japan was closed to the West from 1637 until 1854, the prints between those dates reflect the Japanese clothing using vegetable dyes and the brocades that were produced on hand-worked looms. Prints dating after 1854 and later in the 19th century will begin to show the modernization and influences of the Western culture. For example, the colors are deeper and darker, made possible with the new aniline dyes (discovered around 1850). The brocade patterns will be more complicated because the Japanese mastered the Jacquard loom techniques after weavers were sent to Lyon, France, in 1871.

Catalog Print # 3

Okumura Masanobu,

FOUR SLEEPERS OF THE PLEASURE QUARTER. ca.1711-16

This courtesan wears her obi tied in front, making it easier to undo. Compare with print #13 by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, WHETSTONE, 1842. This is a mother (and son) and she has her obi tied in the back.

Catalog Print # 5

Torii Kiyomitsu

COURTESAN READING A LETTER, ca, 1760s

Perhaps she is reading a “next morning letter.” According to a custom that began in the Heian period, after a night of love, a gentleman was expected to send a poem to express his thanks. It was to be written on fine, handmade paper and in the knot of the tie, a flower or spray of blossoms would be inserted.

It appears her black obi is tied in front and she wears several layers of kimono. She wears a white underkinomo with a green print kimono. The fabric could have been printed by the yuzen method and her outer garment, a uchiki, may be printed with a yuzen method also or perhaps is a brocade with black ink and embroidery.

Catalog Print # 6

Suzuki Harunobu

SCENE IN A YOSHIWARA BROTHEL, ca.1766-70

This print was the first in a series representing the twelve months and serves as a prelude to more explicit references to sex in the following images. It was customary for a courtesan to greet her client beautifully and fully dressed. She then changed into less formal attire while a young serving girl entertained the customer while the courtesan was out of the room. While she has been changing, the customer is trying to seduce the girl. The man wears a striped kimono, perhaps made of cotton, as required by the sumptuary laws in the early 18th century. All three figures appear to be wearing red underkimonos, thought to have medicinal properties. The courtesan and the client are wearing simple sashes as well as the girl.

Catalog Print # 8

Kitao Shigemasa & Katsukawa Shunsho

COURTESANS OF THE OHISHIYA VIEWING MT. FUJI, 1776

Two courtesans elegantly attired are wearing winter clothing. The women are named as in the title as is the name of their brothel in the upper right corner. Each scene features different kimonos and it is easy to count the layers. The outer robes or uchikakes are probably dyed with the yuzen process. This new styled robe was very popular in the Edo period. The uchikake is different from the uchiki in that it has a longer neckband and is worn a bit off the shoulders and held closed in the front with a hand. Both women have their obis tied in front. In the left side, the front uchikake may have been printed using the black-ink process in combination with a brocade and yuzen dye process. The obi worn by the standing woman on the left seems to be printed with the black-ink perhaps on a cotton square fabric.

Catalog Print # 9

Isoda Koryusai

CLEANING THE ASHIDA, late 1770s

This is known as a pillar print and shows the popular theme of two lovers together under a snow laden umbrella. It suggests an egalitarian love relationship as the male stoops to clean the snow from between the struts of the woman's *ashida* (high clogs for rain or snow). The man wears a popular plaid kimono probably made of cotton (see above) in red, brown and black. Her kimono is plain, but it looks like her obi is tied in front. The Japanese name for the brown of his kimono is *cha iro* – literally “tea color.” It is the soft brown of roasted tea leaves. As the custom of tea drinking became popular among the common people, the “color of tea” became popular in textiles as well.

Catalog Print # 11
Keisai Eisen
BEAUTIES COMPARED (BIJIN AWASE), mid 1830s

The bats on her sash (or a small obi, tied in front) represent good luck because the character for bat is the same as that for happiness. Her kimono design may be bamboo which also symbolizes good fortune and was probably dyed using the yuzen process. The intricate sash might brocade with embroidery for the bats.

Catalog Print # 14
Keisai Eisen
WOMAN HOLDING A CAT, ca. 1843-45

The over-all design of her outer kimono might be decorated in the komon technique, which sets off the details of the woven fabric of the obi (tied in front). She wears a red underkimono probably tucked into a hakama (the loose divided skirt) and over that is another kimono of a soft red/white resist dyed fabric. The cat wears a soft bow that matches the middle kimono.

Catalog Print # 15
Utagawa Kuniyoshi
LATE RISING IS NOT PROFITABLE, ca. 1845

The woman wears a striped kimono, probably cotton and woven by peasant weavers, over a red underkimono. The arrangement of her garments mirror those of the saintly Buddhist above. Sometimes the affectionate cat may be a reference to a male lover.

Note the artist's seal in each of these prints is the paulownia. In an earlier century this was an imperial seal.

Catalog Print # 16
Utagawa Kuniyoshi
ACT SEVEN, 1847

This is another humorous print with each of the women seeming to admire the other's beautiful garment. The central figure wears a garment that appears to be lined in a tiny komon print. The soft olive-colored outer fabric might be kasuri, a fabric that is both woven and resist-dyed. Her obi is tied in the back and under everything is a red underkimono with matching hair ornaments.

Catalog Print # 17
Utagawa Kuniyoshi
OUCH! GIANT OCTOPUS OF NAMERIKAWA IN ETCHU PROVINCE, 1852

Kuniyoshi trained both his daughters in print design and co-produced this print with his daughter, Yoshitori. This woman is dressed in what might be another kasuri printed kimono, one in the komon style. She wears both a red and a yellow-printed kimono under the deep blue and white outer kimono. Her obi is made from either a brocade or a yuzon printed fabric. The aggressive cat wears a printed tie around the neck.

Catalog Print # 19
Toyohara Kunichika
NEWLY WOVEN BROCADES: MUSASHI BEAUTIES,

By 1883, modern aniline chemical dyes were available in Japan and they enabled the dyer to achieve darker colors. The woman in the foreground wears the latest fashions: the under kimono of tan and white appears to be komon dyed. Then a deep red or perhaps the lining of the shibori (or possibly kanoko-shibori) printed kimono. There is also an intricately woven brocade fabric (perhaps using the Jacquard loom) showing under the red printed layer. Only a highly accomplished printer would have been able to produce such a detailed woodcut. There is a suggestion of lewd behavior in the way the courtesan stimulates her pet cat.