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1998

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An Early Seventeenth-Century Japanese Textile in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

by
Joyce Denney

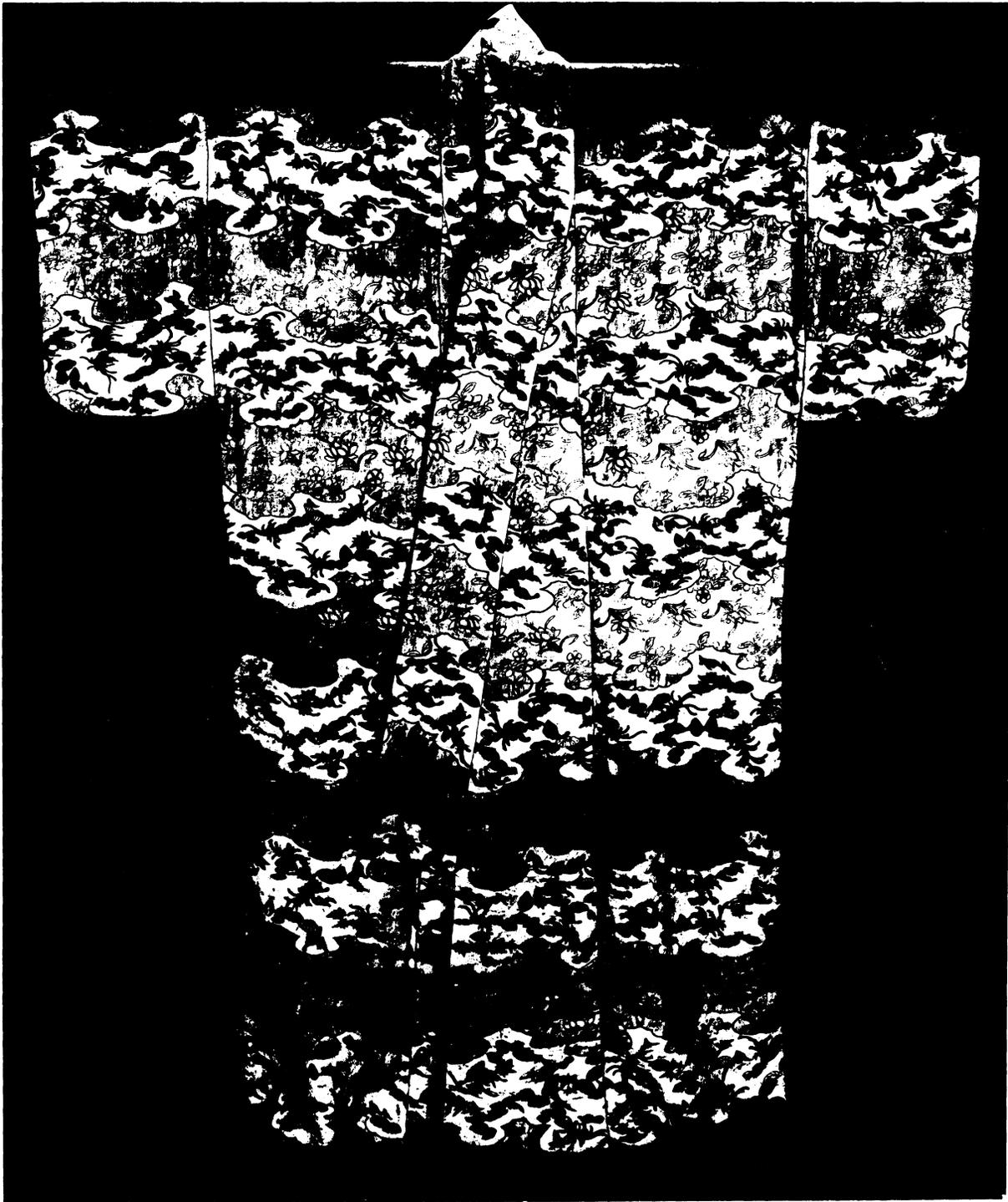
As a site seminar at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a rare early seventeenth-century Japanese robe (*kosode*) in the Museum's collection (see ill.) was examined in depth. The sumptuous complexity of the textile from which the robe was made was analyzed, with emphasis on the textile's makers and their methods as well as the markets of the period.

The ground fabric, a white float-patterned plain-weave silk, was probably produced in China. During this period Chinese silk was highly prized in Japan; nevertheless, this imported cloth was then highly embellished. The textile was resist-dyed in irregularly bordered bands that alternate in color—blue and white. On the robe's white bands hundreds of small seashells were embroidered in polychrome silk floss—giving the robe its informal nickname, “the seashell *kosode*.” The light blue bands were decorated with gold leaf that outlines and gives interior details of the textile's repeating woven floral design.

The seashell *kosode* was given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1992. Formerly, it was in the collection of Nomura Shōjirō (1879-1943). Mr. Nomura was a famous Japanese collector and dealer in Japanese textiles.

Kosode, ancestor of the Japanese kimono, literally means “small sleeves.” The smallness of the sleeves actually refers to the small wrist opening of the garment. Anyone familiar with today's Japanese kimono will notice, however, that by comparison, the sleeves of the seashell *kosode* are quite small, and the body is quite wide. Kimonos of the mid to late twentieth century use a selvage-to-selvage width for each of the two sleeves and for each half of the back of the body, making the horizontal width of a sleeve (*sode haba*) and that of half the back of the kimono (*ushiro haba*) the same.¹ The seashell *kosode*, however, has a much narrower *sode haba* than *ushiro haba*, at 22.5 cm for the sleeve and close to 40 cm for the *ushiro haba*. This ratio, along with other dimensions noted by Iwao Nagasaki in his brief report on this *kosode*,² is consistent with a style of *kosode* worn in the Momoyama and early Edo periods.

The seashell *kosode* falls into the style characterized as “Keichō *kosode*.” The Keichō period lasted from 1596 to 1615; however, the Keichō style lasted until the middle of the century and the beginning of a new style, named the “Kanbun style” after the Kanbun period, which began in 1661. One difficulty in explaining the assignment of the seashell *kosode* to the Keichō style is that the *kosode* departs from some of the characteristics most often associated with the Keichō style, especially the color palette and the character of the gold-leafed motifs. The color palette most often associated with the Keichō style is the combination of red, white, and black (or dark brown) in the same *kosode*, and the stereotypical gold-leafed motifs of Keichō *kosode* are done with stencils.



KOSODE. Japanese (Edo period [1615-1868]), early 17th century. Plain-weave silk with warp floats, silk embroidery and impressed gold. l. 55 in. (141 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul T. Nomura, in memory of Mr. and Mrs. S. Morris Nomura, 1992 (1992.253)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Three aspects of the seashell *kosode* were most relevant to the conference's theme of makers, methods, and markets. The first of these is the probable Chinese origin of the textile, called *saya*, used as the ground. The second is the textile's light blue color, called *asagi*, and its change in popularity during the first half of the 17th century among an elite segment of the market, as seen in the records of the famous dye shop, the Kariganeya. The third is the question of methods used to apply gold leaf. All these aspects will be explored, with occasional comments upon the non-stereotypical characteristics of the seashell *kosode*, a Keichō *kosode* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Saya

The textile from which this *kosode* was made is called *saya* in Japanese. *Saya* today is defined in terms of its structure, a 3/1 twill pattern on a plain-weave ground, making it a variation of plain weave. The pattern of the *saya* used in the seashell *kosode* includes both linear elements (diagonal lines) and floral elements (two kinds of flowers, one probably an orchid).

To find definitions and textual references to *saya*, dictionaries were consulted. The word *saya* is said to have come from the Portuguese, which helps to explain why it was not in the Japanese-Portuguese dictionary published by the Jesuit press in Nagasaki in 1603, with a supplement dated 1604.³

The *Daigenkai*⁴ characterizes *saya* as an imported textile that came to be imitated in Japan. It also offers several textual references, including mention of *saya* on a cargo list from a ship that arrived in Japan in 1605, and two mentions in a gazetteer of the Kan'ei period (1624-1644) that lists famous products of various parts of China. *Saya* played a role as one of the many silk products involved in the lucrative China-Japan trade of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The Japanese paid high prices in silver, especially for Chinese reeled silk but also for woven textiles, during a time of both high Chinese demand for silver and a seemingly endless appetite of the Japanese for Chinese silk. As late as 1641, close to 60,000 bolts (*tan*) of *saya* were imported into Japan on foreign ships, according to preserved cargo lists.⁵

Saya did come to be made in Japan, although precisely when appears to be unclear. Some sources⁶ state that the Japanese (or, more specifically, the weavers of Nishijin in Kyoto) began producing *saya* during the Tenshō period (1573-1592). However, another source⁷ cited a reference dating to the Tenna period (1681-1684), 100 years later, relating that *saya* had begun to be woven in Nishijin "in recent times."

Was the *saya* of the seashell *kosode* woven in Japan or in China? In investigating this question, width of the woven textile is a key: Chinese textiles are commonly held to be wider than Japanese textiles. But what width? How much wider?

Finding specific data to flesh out this generalization is not easy. For Chinese woven silk textiles of the general time period, the Dingling tomb, made for the Wanli emperor (r. 1578-1620), is a good source. One hundred eight bolts of

cloth were excavated from this tomb, and for all but two of these, selvage-to-selvage width was in the range of 60 to 69.9 cm.⁸

No comparable cache of Japanese-woven textiles of the same period exists, so information on Japanese textiles' selvage-to-selvage width must be inferred from Japanese laws of 1626 and 1631 forbidding the production of widths less than approximately 42.5 cm.⁹ The fact that such a regulation was deemed necessary, and especially that it had to be re-announced five years later, is evidence that widths under 42.5 cm must have been increasingly common during the period. If 42.5 cm is treated as a common maximum width for Japanese textiles, the difference between the widths of Japanese and Chinese textiles of the period, around 20 cm or more, is unmistakable. The selvage-to-selvage width of Chinese textiles of the early 17th century can thus be characterized as 60-69.9 cm versus the Japanese target width of 42.5 cm, a difference to 17.5 to 27.4 cm.

Rarely do opportunities arise to examine the construction of *kosode* of dates as early as the first half of the 17th century. Most *kosode* are lined, and their seams and evidence of remodeling are often hidden beneath the lining. The chance arose to examine the seashell *kosode*. In viewing its back seam and one side seam, both at the lower edge of the *kosode*, it became clear that one of the components from which the seashell *kosode* is made comprises a selvage-to-selvage width.¹⁰ In addition, it was possible to determine that the *kosode* had been remodeled. Evidence of wear proved that the *kosode* had been altered slightly: near the bottom of the *kosode* the side seam had been taken in, and the width of half the back of the *kosode* (the *ushiro haba*), instead of its current 36.6 cm, was originally 39.8 cm. If a 1.5 cm seam allowance at the side and back seams is added, the resulting width, 42.8 cm, is very close to the normal selvage to-selvage width for Japanese textiles of the time, 42.5 cm. And yet, the 42.8 width includes only one selvage. The possibility that this *kosode* was made from an imported *saya* textile is very strong.

An interesting side benefit of examining the non-selvage edge found at the center back seam was the insight it gave into details of the method used to decorate the *saya* ground of the seashell *kosode*. The cut edge of the cloth had been turned under and stitched in a very fine running stitch. The thread used for the stitching was white in the white bands and light blue (*asagi*) in the light blue bands of the *kosode*, demonstrating that the textile had been cut and the cut edge reinforced with stitching before the first major step in the decoration—the dyeing of the blue bands.

Asagi

Among the least stereotypical of the traits of the Metropolitan Museum's Keichō *kosode* is its blue and white color scheme. The typical Keichō *kosode* is described as having a tri-colored ground: red, black or brown, and white.

In the Keichō style, as others have noted,¹¹ brown was a rapidly emerging trend, but light blue (*asagi*) seems to have been a slow-to-fade trait inherited from an earlier time. The fate of *asagi* is clarified in an important reference for

the study of Japanese textiles, the early 17th-century records of the Kariganeya,¹² a dye workshop in Kyoto.

To show what happened to *asagi*, the light blue color seen in the dyed bands of the seashell *kosode*, three sets of the Kariganeya's records were compared. These three sets seem to be the most complete of the records of the first half of the 17th century in terms of the amount of detail they offer on the colors ordered. The first set of data is a ledger for dyeing kept by the Kariganeya in 1602 and 1603 (Keichō 7 and 8).¹³ It is quite extensive and detailed, usually listing ground color and colors of the motifs. As in all three sets of data, the clientele is quite elite, including members of the Shogun's household.

The second set of data comes from the years 1614 (Keichō 19) and 1616 (Genna 2),¹⁴ a record of two orders for dyed cloth from a head waiting woman in the private apartments of the Shogun, Tokugawa Hidetada. These texts are quite sketchy and brief.

The third set of data is from a later year of the period of Keichō style, 1646 (Shōhō 3).¹⁵ It is a notebook of orders for dyed cloth, less extensive than the first order book of 1602-1603 and with fewer occurrences of the specification of a ground color, but more complete than the sketchy data of 1614 and 1616.

In the early years (1602-1603) light blue (*asagi*) was the most often mentioned, with nearly 200 references. However, red (*beni*) was more often specified as the ground (36 versus *asagi*'s 27). Third place went to white (*shiro*), mentioned more than 100 times, 20 times specified as the ground. By contrast, all browns (colors that included *cha*, "brown," in their names) occurred 14 times, of which 7 specified a brown shade as the ground. In the early years, *asagi* far outstripped brown in popularity.

In the second set of data, from 1614 and 1616, color words for shades of brown, including both *cha* and the new term *kurobeni* (literally, "black-red"), were mentioned 4 times as opposed to 5 occurrences for *asagi*. In this skimpy set of data, brown and light blue are practically in a dead heat.

The third set of data, from 1646, has the following top three: red (*beni*), a deep yellow (*ukon*), and white (*shiro*), with red and white specified equally often as the ground. *Asagi* (light blue) does occur in this set of data, cited less than half as often as red (*beni*) and never specified as the ground. The brown colors *kurobeni*, *tobi*, and *cha*—as an aggregate—occur about half as often as *asagi* and are never specified as the ground.

In summary, judging from the records of the Kariganeya, light blue (*asagi*) suffered a gradual decline throughout the first half of the 17th century, moving from high popularity in 1602-1603 to a slipping but solid performance in 1614 and 1616, and finally, to a decided further downhill slide in 1646, when it received no mention as a ground color.

Surihaku

The seashell *kosode* is sometimes called a *muihaku*, with *nui* referring to embroidery and *haku* to the applied gold leaf. Classic *muihaku* of the preceding Momoyama period often have dense embroidery with long soft satin stitches in

silk (the *mui* part of *muihaku*) and a background of solid applied gold or silver leaf (the *haku* part of *muihaku*).

The process of applying metallic leaf (*surihaku*) currently in use in Kyoto by a craftsman reproducing a Momoyama *muihaku*¹⁶ involves several steps. First, the underdrawing for embroidery is brushed on in ink (*sumi*). Second, the cloth is prepared for the process by applying *dosa*, a combination of animal glue and alum. (The wet cloth is apparently smoothed directly onto a board which provides a stable working surface.) Then, when the cloth is dry, the *surihaku* process can begin. A thin paste called *himenori* (a grain-based paste, in this case made from rice) is applied with a brush to a small area of the background. A sheet of gold leaf is picked up with bamboo tweezers and placed on the pasted area. Then the area is pressed from above. When the paste is dry, the excess gold leaf that has not adhered is brushed away (and saved for recycling).

The application of metallic leaf most ordinarily associated with *kosode* of the Keichō style is different. Instead of being brushed on, paste is applied to the cloth through one or more stencils. The paste used for this purpose is much thicker than the paste brushed on in the classic Momoyama process. In addition, the patterns are most often repetitive florals or geometric diapers.

The seashell *kosode*'s patterning in gold leaf is unique among Japanese textiles seen by the author. Unlike the typical gold leaf patterning of a Keichō *kosode*, stencils were not used. Instead, the paste and gold leaf were applied to the outlines and inner details of the woven floral pattern in the *kosode*'s blue bands. The gold leaf serves to emphasize the woven floral patterns. Here, the Metropolitan Museum's seashell *kosode* shows characteristics of an intermediate level between the classic Momoyama and classic Keichō *surihaku* processes. In the high Momoyama style, the paste was applied freehand; in the high Keichō style, the result was quite repetitive; in the seashell *kosode*, a freehand application of paste was used to obtain a somewhat repetitive result.

Summary

As a site seminar at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an elaborately decorated early seventeenth-century *kosode* was examined in some depth. First, the woven textile that served as the ground was explored, with reasons given for considering it a probable import. Second, the *kosode*'s light blue color (*asagi*) was investigated by means of the Kariganeya dye shop's records of orders placed by an elite clientele in the early seventeenth century, revealing that *asagi* became gradually less and less frequently mentioned during the period, especially as a ground color. Finally, the process of applying gold leaf (*surihaku*) as it is used today was reviewed for the insights it could reveal into the Metropolitan Museum's *kosode*.

The present study is only preliminary, and many themes related to the *kosode* were beyond the scope of the presentation. Perhaps this site seminar was a useful first look at makers, methods, and markets related to the Metropolitan Museum's Keichō style robe, the seashell *kosode*.

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- ¹ Kamiya, “Kosode,” 32.
² Nagasaki, *Zaigai*, 255, 294.
³ The author consulted the Japanese language version of the dictionary: *Nippo jisho*, Doi Tadao, Morita Takeshi, and Chōnan Minoru, translators, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1980).
⁴ Otsuki, ed., *Daigenkai*, 858.
⁵ Nagazumi, *Tōsen yushutsunyūhin*, 36-37.
⁶ *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, 9:142 and Kitamura, *Nihon no orimono*, 52.
⁷ Otsuki, ed., *Daigenkai*, 858.
⁸ *Dingling* 1:239-249.
⁹ Discussed in Maruyama, “Kosode no keitai no henka,” 25-26.
¹⁰ This fact is not surprising. The author has seen three Keichō *kosode* or former *kosode* without linings. Of these three, not one includes a selvage-to-selvage width in any component. That is, when one side of a component is a selvage, the other is a cut edge.
¹¹ Kawakami, “Keichō jidai no keifu,” 9-11.
¹² The records are published, converted from the original Edo-period handwritten orders and receipts to typeset Japanese, in Yamane, *Konishi-ke kyūzo*.
¹³ Yamane, *Konishi-ke kyūzo*, 10-21.
¹⁴ Yamane, *Konishi-ke kyūzo*, 22-24.
¹⁵ Yamane, *Konishi-ke kyūzo*, 36-42.
¹⁶ The author was privileged to visit the craftsman Mr. Yasuhiro Takahashi in Kyoto, Japan, on June 24, 1998.

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