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Omoshirogara
Textile Design and Children's Clothing in Japan 1910-1930

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The early twentieth century in Japan was both a culturally and technologically expansive period. The Taishō era (1912-1926) spurred a new sense of freedom and experimentation in many parts of Japanese culture.¹ Fashion was not immune to the invigorating atmosphere that prevailed, and, although Western fabrics and dress were popular, especially in among the affluent in urban areas, innovations in fabric production in Japan itself also brought new and appealing products to the marketplace. Some of these textiles, several of which had been developed earlier in the century and begun to be mass-produced by 1912, were especially well-suited to traditional clothing as well as to the “adventurous” ideas and tastes of the times. These included muslin, a light, smooth, and finely woven fabric made originally of wool (later, cotton), *niko-niko kasuri* (“fake” or “playful” *kasuri*) and *meisen*, a type of silk (Figs. 1 and 2). Both these latter textiles used warp or warp-and-weft printing techniques to mimic the more labor-intensive and expensive traditionally dyed *kasuri* textiles.²



Figure (left) 1. Detail, blimp design, *niko-niko kasuri*, late 1920s. Collection of Michiko Okunishi, Osaka, Japan. Used with permission. **Figure 2 (right).** Detail, woman's haori, airplane design, *meisen*, early 1930s. Collection of The Narita Family, Yokohama, Japan. Used with permission.

These textiles lent themselves well to the innovative and exciting imagery on textiles that was capturing the essence of Japan as a rapidly modernizing country. The designers of these images intended these textiles to be distinctive and dramatically different from the traditional designs of

¹ Reiko Morinaga Brandon, *Bright and Daring: Japanese Kimono in the Taishō Mode* (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1996), 13.

² Jacqueline M. Atkins, “‘Extravagance is the Enemy’: Fashion and Textiles in Wartime Japan,” in *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home front in Japan, Britain, and the United States 1931-1945*, ed. Jacqueline M. Atkins (New Haven and London: published for the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture by Yale University Press, 2005), 159.

the past that were, for the most part, based on time-honored seasonal and literary motifs and themes. Rather, these new designs mirrored contemporary popular culture and offer us today a unique visual reference of the social, cultural, and even political interests and icons of the period. The designs, which were used primarily on traditionally printed textiles (muslin was a favorite for this, as it lent itself particularly well to western chemical dyes that were also new to Japan), as well as the newer *meisen* and *niko-niko kasuri*, were termed *omoshirogara*—that is, interesting and/or amusing designs or patterns, and were comparable to what in the West have been called “novelty” or “conversation” prints (Fig. 3).³



Figure 3. Detail, printed wool muslin, 1930s. Images show a zoo and examples of modern transportation and architecture. Collection of Michiko Okunishi, Osaka, Japan. Used with permission.

Omoshirogara ranged from the dramatic to the amusing, from the serious to the frivolous. They contained imagery that included new technologies and inventions as well as popular images from stage, screen (see Fig. 1, for example), and current events. The designs were both a celebration and a reflection of everyday life and culture; they were very much about the rapidly modernizing contemporary life in early twentieth-century Japan and the new interests of the Taishō culture. These new designs appeared in adult wear on *nagajuban* (underkimono) for both men and women, and in the kimono and *haori* (a coat worn over kimono) worn by women. By the Taishō era, although most Japanese men of any standing (those with white-collar jobs and of higher classes) wore western dress, some traditionalists still sported kimono for daily use, and many men might wear traditional kimono for ceremonial or festive occasions. In these instances, however, men’s outer kimono tended toward the conservative and were unpatterned for the most part, leaving these innovative new designs to be used only on *nagajuban* or on the interior linings of their *haori*, where they would be seen only by intimates or family.⁴ Women’s kimono, made with printed textiles with these new designs, were, however, much more visibly bold and colorful (see Fig. 2, for example).

Omoshirogara were also used extensively in fabrics used for children’s traditional everyday garments. Although by this time many school-age Japanese children of middle and upper-class

³ Jacqueline M. Atkins, “An Arsenal of Design,” in *Wearing Propaganda*, Atkins, ed., 159.

⁴ Kashiwagi Hiroshi, “Design and War: Kimono as ‘Parlor-Performance’ Propaganda,” in *Wearing Propaganda*, Atkins, ed., 178.

families wore Western-style clothing, younger children (usually those under 6 or 7 years old) and those from rural or less affluent families still wore traditional garments. Once children started school, however, they were more likely to wear school uniforms, which had become popular in the late 19th century. Boys' uniforms were cut in a vaguely militaristic style, while girls usually wore sailor blouses and skirts.⁵ Again, this was the case primarily in affluent urban areas; children in rural areas were more likely to continue to wear traditional clothing for longer periods of time. Like their parents, however, whether daily dress was “modern” (meaning Western-style) or traditional (kimono), boys and especially girls wore kimono for formal, festival, or ceremonial wear. For these occasions, young girls' kimono still leaned toward traditional design—abundant flowers, or designs that, while colorful, leaned toward the ‘pretty’ or “cute” rarely than reflecting modernity in the patterns.

Perhaps because Japan was a patriarchal society, the designs for boys offered a huge range of omoshirogara motifs that very much reflected the contemporary life and new interests of Taishō/early Shōwa culture.⁶ Sports that had been unknown in Japan before Western contact in the last part of the nineteenth century—baseball (Fig. 4), tennis, skiing and sledding, and many children's activities such as riding bicycles or scooters—are depicted on the textiles, and images related to the Olympics also appear frequently (Fig. 5). Japan won its first gold medal in the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, and Tokyo was chosen as the site for the 1940 Olympics, both of which helped to create a national frenzy for sports in the country.⁷

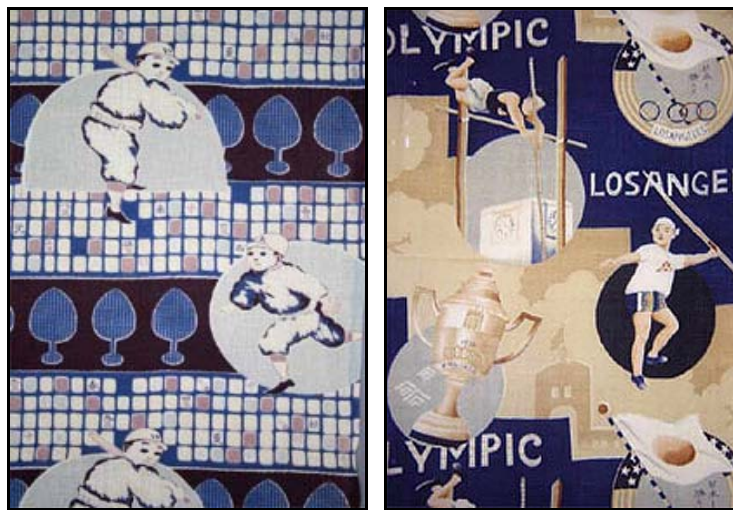


Figure 4 (left). Detail, baseball players, printed silk, mid-1920s. **Figure 5 (right).** Detail, celebration of the Los Angeles Olympics, printed wool muslin, 1932-33. Both textiles from the Collection of Michiko Okunishi, Osaka, Japan. Used with permission.

⁵ Atkins, ““Extravagance is the Enemy,”” 158. An interesting side observation here is that girls seemed to be put into Western dresses much earlier than boys into pants, perhaps because the traditional fabrics for boy's kimono (such as true *kasuri* or *niko-niko kasuri*) offered a sturdiness and durability that was not necessarily found in Western garments.

⁶ The Shōwa period coincides with the reign of the Shōwa emperor (Hirohito, 1926-1989). The early Shōwa years reflected some of the same enthusiasms as seen during the Taishō ear, but the mood soon changed with the increasing militarism of the 1930s.

⁷ Due to the expanding war in Europe as well as negative Western reaction to Japanese aggression in East Asia in the late 1930s, the 1940 Olympics were canceled, to the great dismay of many Japanese.

Film was also used as an icon of modernity and favorites for children's clothing were those designs that included both Western and Japanese popular cartoon characters (Fig. 6). Movie equipment also appeared in designs; one for a boy's kimono depicts film projectors surrounded by vignettes of military scenes of the kind likely to have been included in newsreels, thus neatly combining modernity and militarism. Important public figures and events, such as the 1937 coronation of King George VI in England (Fig. 7), that captured the popular imagination were equally of interest to designers and the public alike.



Figure 6 (left). Detail, American and Japanese cartoon characters (Betty Boop, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Norakuta, etc.), printed silk, late 1920s. Collection of Michiko Okunishi, Osaka, Japan. Used with permission.
Figure 7 (right). Detail, commemoration of coronation of King George VI, printed muslin, 1937. Collection of Michiko Okunishi, Osaka, Japan. Used with permission.

Cars, trains, trams, ships, and airplanes were also exciting new modes of transportation that encapsulated modernity for the Japanese, and these were extensively depicted on boys' kimono (Fig. 8). It was the airplane, however, that perhaps, more than any other invention represented the soaring spirit of modernity to the Japanese. It captured the public imagination and spirit, and numerous textiles from the 1920s into the 1940s feature airplanes somewhere in their design. Airplanes were especially popular in the designs for young boys; they appeared on everything from ceremonial garments such as *omiyamairi* (shrine-visiting kimono) and *haregi* ("dress-up" kimono) to everyday kimono. As with traditional imagery for such garments (often represented by samurai or warriors), the airplane represented all that parents would want for their child in a modern world: power, strength, the ability to reach beyond the clouds (Fig. 9).

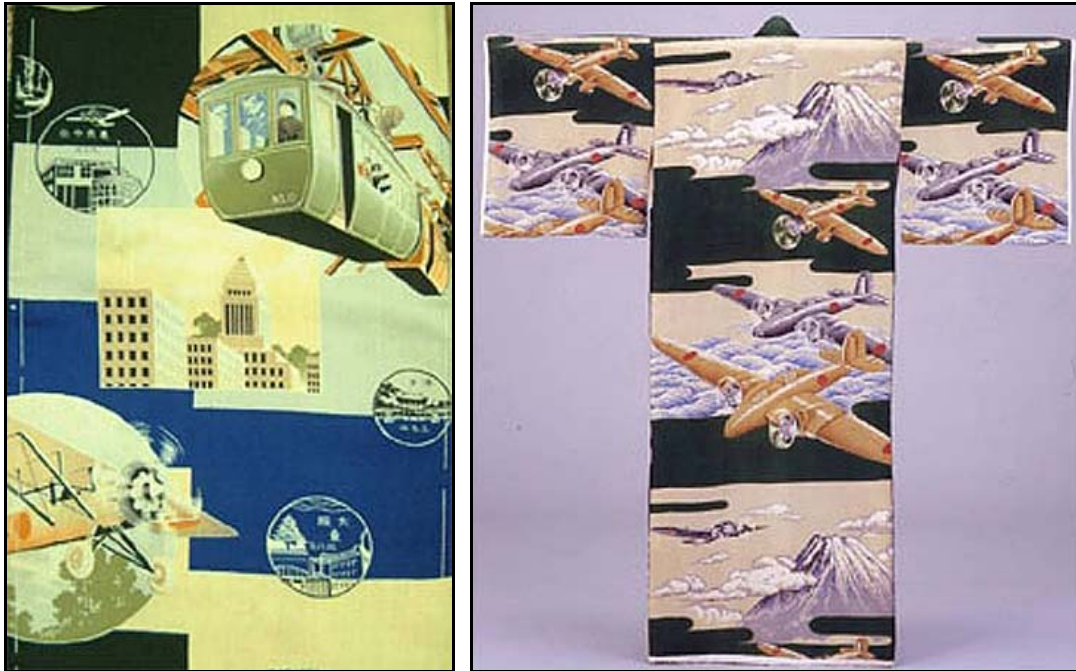


Figure 8 (left). Detail, modern transportation, printed wool muslin, 1937. Collection of Michiko Okunishi, Osaka, Japan. Used with permission. **Figure 9 (right).** Boy's haregi, war planes and Mt. Fuji, printed silk, late 1930s. Collection of Yoku Tanaka, Tokyo, Japan. Used with permission.

The growing militarism of the 1920s and 1930s also found its way into omoshirogara, with child soldiers, bombers (see Fig. 10), battleships, and all types of military paraphernalia becoming increasing popular as design elements as war escalated through the 1930s. The material side of warfare, in textile design at least, was seen as exciting and reflective of Japan's modern power, rather than as potentially destructive and horrifying.



Figure 10. Boy's haregi, searchlights, airplanes, and bombs, printed silk, late 1930s. Collection of Yoku Tanaka, Tokyo, Japan. Used with permission.

This brief survey of a few of the many omoshirogara textiles of this period has only scraped the surface of potential discussion of designs. Aside from the designs themselves, two further ideas are worth considering. First, children's images are often included on these textiles, yet, in a paradoxical design shift, to emphasize Japan's "modernity" these children are depicted in Western dress, not kimono (Figs. 3 and 4). However, the modernism implied in the design, as represented by children in Western clothes, is presented within the context of the traditional clothing that children are actually wearing—garments that were symptomatic of a growing anachronism at the time as more and more people moved to adopt Western clothing as a symbol of modernity and the wearer's part in it, as well as being more practical to wear.

Second, children in the age group that would be wearing these clothes have very little say in what they wear; rather, adults make the decisions for them, choosing the clothing and deciding when and where the garments will be worn. Parents have great hopes and dreams for the future of their child, so it is not surprising that, consciously or unconsciously, they often wrap their children in clothing with designs symbolic of their aspirations. These choices can reflect not only economic status but also social, aesthetic, moral, and political values, and textiles with vivid iconography can allow a strong public belief statement to be made as the parents use their children as canvases to reflect their own values to the public at large. Although this is most easily seen in the elaborate designs chosen for ceremonial garments such as omiyamairi, the same can also be seen in parents' choice of the more prosaic omoshirogara for their child's clothing, as the imagery may still represent what parents desire for their child: the ability to become a part of the brave new world that modernity represents. And over time, such imagery may also play a part in influencing, acculturating, and even indoctrinating the wearer to the overt values of the society in which he is being reared.

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