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## JAPANESE KIMONO FASHION OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Annie Van Asche

### Introduction

This paper examines the development of popular kimono fashion from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. I focus on kimono worn by modern-thinking young women whose wardrobes, by the 1920's, included both new Western and recreated Japanese garments and accessories. The *meisen kasuri* kimono, the most popular new style of kimono among women living in the growing urban metropolitan centers, is highlighted.<sup>1</sup> It covers an unprecedented historical period of rapid modernization and Westernization of Japan, which brought about societal changes that dramatically--and positively--transformed the lives of Japanese women. I begin with a historical sketch of the industrialization of the silk industry in the Meiji period (1868-1912) and the concurrent marketing of the "fashion" kimono throughout Japan (fig 1).

By the Taisho period (1912-1926), a new breed of textile designer had emerged--a graduate from one of the new art colleges working in the design section for a large department store. I show several examples of these new design-made kimono--a hybridized garment with Western design motifs interspersed with new interpretations of traditional Japanese ones. Popular trends in the development of early 20th century kimono fashion are identified and studied throughout these three main phases.

The essential structure of the kimono has changed only slightly in its 800 year-old history (fig. 2). Two straight panels approximately 14 inches wide and slightly more than twice the height of an individual in length, make up the kimono body. The sleeves are made of two panels attached to each of the outer edges. Add two half-width panels to the front edges and a long collar and you have a complete kimono. It is wrapped in front, left over right, and held together by a sash at the waist. It is economical from the standpoint that there is little waste from cutting. While its basic structure has remained constant throughout history, designs applied to the surface of the kimono have acted as indicator of change and carrier of code (gender, age, social class, rural/urban, etc.).

In the Meiji period, silk kimono became available to women of all social classes for the first time since the Heian period.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1900's, an increased demand for silk kimono spurred the rise of new textile centers throughout Japan, and good kimono designers were highly sought after. In the 1910's, newly founded department stores, such

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on *meisen kasuri* kimono, see TSA's 1998 symposium proceedings by Yoshiko Wada, Kazuo Mutoh, and Masanao Arai.

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Silk was considered a luxury item for all but the wealthy throughout the Edo period. People of the lower classes primarily wore kimono made of cotton or low-grade bast fibers until the mid-Meiji period. See Hauser 1975, 62-67.

as Mitsukoshi in Tokyo and Daimaru in Osaka, established design sections and began marketing “*zuan-zukuri*” (design-made) kimono. In 1920's Japan, designers were creating new and exciting kimono with bright colors and bold motifs which appealed to *the moga* or brazen “modern girl” (fig 3). Well aware of the exotic hold that Western garments had on this new generation of sophisticated young urban women, designers embraced Japan's traditional costume and by doing so successfully transformed it into a new garment that equally appealed to these women.

Competition among garment retailers was steep in Meiji Japan. While the wealthy and upper class bought expensive imported Western clothes, the emerging middle class demanded inexpensive silk kimono in the latest Western-inspired designs. The kimono industry responded with affordable and stylish silk kimono that could be worn for everyday wear, and as work and school uniforms.

The kimono fashion of the Meiji period was a hybrid, as women mixed Western items such as coats, hats, and leather shoes with kimono. By doing so, they both satisfied their material needs and demonstrated their patriotic attempts to modernize.

### **Meiji Japan (1868-1912)**

In the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan was abruptly shaken from two-and-a-half centuries of isolation and feudal rule. The new order restored direct imperial rule, and the capital was moved from Kyoto to Tokyo. Its young leaders set out to create a modern centralized state, under the rubric “Civilization and Enlightenment.” Traditional artisans, who for centuries had relied on government patronage, now found themselves independent agents of their own fate. Many artisans did not survive this transition, while those who applied Western science and technologies to their craft fared better.

The textile industry--in particular silk--was enormously important to the government during this transitional period and became the mainstay of Japan's industrial revolution. Silk was Japan's number one export product in the Meiji period, and there were strong government incentives to increase consumption within and outside of Japan. The rapid industrialization and Westernization of Meiji Japan--rather than suppress Japan's traditional costume--acted as a catalyst for its preservations. By the 1920's, the development of new and less expensive fabrics produced with timesaving dyeing and weaving methods combined wider distribution and availability due to the establishment of a nation-wide rail system provided women a wider choice of clothing types and styles than ever before.

In 1870, the first modern silk filature factory was built by the Maebashi clan north of Tokyo in Gunma Pref (fig. 4). A Swiss expert named Mueller (living in Yokohama) was hired to establish a silk reeling factory using Italian imported equipment. It opened with 24 female employees, and soon moved to the western suburbs of Tokyo. Mueller was next hired to build the Ono Silk Filature factory in 1871 in Tokyo. This factory had 60 silk reeling machines, the largest of its kind. Soon thereafter steam-driven pumps were introduced to power the reeling machines. There were also government-run factories--like the one under French supervision in Tomioka (Gunma Pref.) in 1872--which was much larger and more efficient. Eighty percent of the workforce in the silk industry was young women--mainly from rural areas, living in crowded dormitories, underpaid and working long hours. And yet even under these harsh conditions, this lifestyle offered certain advances for those aspiring to gain economic mobility, independence and become part of the growing urban middle class.

Rapid advancements in technology in the first two decades of the Meiji period revolutionized not only silk as an export product, but also the kimono as the national costume. German aniline dyes first shown at the Vienna World Exposition in 1875 were brought to Japan shortly thereafter. Around this same time, the fly shuttle loom was brought to Japan from Europe. Western mechanical spinning machines--specially designed to spin both reeled and floss silks--were introduced to silk centers throughout Japan. Jacquard looms were imported from France in 1873, and they were soon replicated by Japanese entrepreneurs. European books and manuals on the mechanization of the textile industry were also being distributed in Japan.

Application of these new technologies was strongly encouraged by both local and central governments. Nishijin Kyoto, long the capital of Japan's traditional textile industry and home to *yuzen* (dyeing with the use of rice paste as a resist), led the way. But it was not easy for Kyoto kimono designers born into a textile family—taught the value of strict conservatism for many generations—to change. While a small number of professional kimono designers were sent to Europe for training, those at home struggled with fresh interpretations of Edo-style kimono designs. At first, they resisted using chemical dyes with their bright colors and strong contrasts, in spite of their obvious conveniences and practicalities. Progressive Tokyo, on the other hand, provided fertile turf for a new generation of kimono designer as entrepreneur. These first generation designers, without the burden of tradition, enthusiastically plunged into this exciting new industry, creating fresh interpretations of traditional designs applied to mechanical-spun silk fabrics woven on automated looms.

### **Kimono Fashion Trends of the Meiji Period**

Popular everyday kimono designs in the early Meiji periods included wide stripes, or uncomplicated *kasuri* patterns in subdued colors on thick machine-spun and woven floss silk fabric (figs. 5 and 6). While outer kimono designs remained relatively conservative, designs on women's underkimono (*nagajuban*) were increasingly flamboyant. Many however are defective in their color-fastness, due to the European dyes requiring mordants, with which the Japanese kimono designers were not yet familiar (fig 7). Moreover, designs are often awkward and unsuccessful (fig. 8). Because of the continuous wrapping--from front to back--of the uncut body panels of the kimono, patterns become flopped on the back side, posing a special challenge to this new generation of kimono designers. By the mid-1910s, designers had learned to avoid this problem by either making patterns with no specific orientation, or by adding a seam to the back panel and reversing the fabric.

### ***Meisen* Kimono**

By the late Meiji period, *meisen* kimono was the most popular style and was being produced in numbers unparalleled in the history of kimono. *Meisen* kimono was worn as casual everyday wear--as girl's school uniforms (often worn as an ensemble with matching jackets called *haori*), and as work uniforms (figs. 9 and 10).

*Meisen* is a silk fabric made with machine-spun and woven floss silk (*mawata*). Because cocoons unsuited for filament silk were mechanically processed for *meisen* silk fabric, it was relatively inexpensive. With the *meisen* method, stencils are used to direct-dye the design, enabling designers to produce intricately patterned fabric in a fraction of the time it would take to produce real *kasuri*. It resembles taffeta silk in its somewhat stiff

drape and shiny surface. Although generally described as a plain weave, *meisen* was also done on ribbed fabrics, twills, searsuckers, and crepes. Due to its practicality, affordability, and durability, it proved well suited for household items as well as for everyday clothing.

### **Taisho Japan (1912-1926)**

By the 1910s, bold and colorful kimono with modern motifs was *de rigueur* for young fashion-conscious women. To keep up with demand, the government encouraged Universities to add design departments and hire the best artists of the day to teach Western art theories and contemporary art movements. “*Zuan-zukuri*”--literally meaning “design-made” but carrying the nuance of “original”--was a new concept being applied to all of Japan's traditional crafts (lacquer, ceramics, textiles, etc.). Newly formed design groups promoted their “original/creative designs” (*s saku zuan*). Department stores established design sections and hired young art college graduates who produced interesting and appealing designs for their various products, as well as for posters, advertisement, and packaging.

By the 1920s, Japanese designers were well versed in the exercise of absorbing, assimilating, and applying design principles emerging out of Western art movements. They borrowed heavily from all of the major movements of their day--German Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Bauhaus, Art Deco, and Russian Avant-Garde (fig 11).

### **Showa Japan (1926-1989)**

As the economic demands of increased overseas military activities in the late 1930s became felt in Japan, the government began a national campaign of frugality at home. People were told not to spend money on unnecessary items. Steel machinery, including those used in the silk industry, were commandeered for war equipment. Eventually, people witnessed a decline in their lifestyle. Reflective of the times, kimono designs increasingly became somber in color, the motifs smaller in scale, and sleeves shorter. As its appeal as a fashion garment ultimately began to wane, the kimono industry responded with one last surge of fresh and dynamic designs (figs. 12, 13, and 14).

### **After 1945**

The war had a devastating effect on Japan on many levels. On the physical level, people living in one of the bombed-out metropolitan areas found themselves homeless and without possessions. On the psychological level, the conspicuous presence of the American military reminded people of their defeat, and shame and disgust permeated the national psyche. The consequences of these effects forced a cultural schism upon Japan resulting in a conscious rejection of traditional values and blanket adoption of Western culture and its value systems (fig. 15).

### **Conclusion**

After W.W. II the kimono ceased to be worn as an everyday garment. Sadly, this dramatic 50-year period of high fashion kimono ended precisely when designers were at the peak of their virtuosity in skill and execution, as well as in quality and variety of design.

The kimono of the 50 or so years covered in this paper represent the last remnants of what I call the “living kimono”--kimono as an everyday fashionable garment. As people rebuilt their wardrobes after the war, Western clothing was chosen for its practicality--it could be sewn on electric sewing machines at home with inexpensive commercial fabrics much more quickly than the time it took to sew a kimono by hand. Moreover, the pessimistic mood that followed Japan's defeat in the war negatively impacted people's thinking about their traditional culture. It is for these reasons that I believe that the kimono changed from being an everyday garment to what it is today--a ceremonial garment worn exclusively for special occasions such as weddings, funerals, children's day, and summer festivals.

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