

York Festival of Ideas: Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk

Audience Questions

What did people wear before the 1600s?

The garment we now call a 'kimono' was originally known as a 'kosode', meaning 'small sleeves', a term that referred not to the overall size of the sleeve but to that of the sleeve opening, which was just wide enough for the wrist and arm to pass through. During the Heian period (794-1185), the term kosode was used to signify garments with tubular sleeves and narrow armholes, the contrast being made with ōsode or garments with 'large sleeves'. At this time plain silk kosode were worn by the imperial aristocracy as undergarments for wide-sleeved robes. Commoners also wore kosode, often made of bast fibres such as hemp. During the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1333-1573) periods the political influence of the aristocracy weakened and power shifted to the military (samurai) class. This resulted in a simplification of dress styles so that what had been the undergarment of the Heian court rose to the surface to become an everyday garment, ōsode being worn only on ceremonial occasions. Unlike the plain or simply patterned hemp garments worn by commoners, the kosode of the samurai class were made of richly decorated silk. Over time the tubular sleeves of the Heian period were replaced by longer ones, although still with a narrow opening at the wrist. In the early sixteenth century, a wealthy merchant class began to emerge from the ranks of the general populace and by the Momoyama period (1573-1615) they too had adopted kosode similar to those worn by their samurai counterparts. As a result of these developments the kosode replaced the ōsode as the main form of garment worn by the ruling classes and the economically powerful. The less privileged members of society had continued to wear kosode and thus by the end of the sixteenth century the garment had become the principle form of dress for all sections of Japanese society.

Given that Japan has cold winters, how warm were the kimono?

Kimono are worn in layers, more layers in the winter, fewer layers in the summer. Autumn, winter and spring kimono are also lined and winter kimono have fine silk filaments between the two layers of fabric. Silk in itself is also cool in summer and warm in winter. Of course not many people could actually afford silk and periodically issued (although often ignored) sumptuary laws forbade commoner classes from wearing silk. Hemp or other linen-like fibres were used for kimono, but although garments could still be layered, they were not particularly warm. The introduction of cotton to Japan was enormously important. Cotton was initially imported from Korea and China as a luxury fabric and it was not until the sixteenth century that it began to be successfully cultivated in the more southerly and westerly areas of Japan. The increasingly widespread production and use of cotton brought dramatic social and economic changes to Japan. It is impossible to exaggerate the impact cotton had on ordinary people's lives and the hitherto unimaginable luxury it allowed. Cotton was soft, comfortable to wear against the skin and warm, and garments could also be wadded with cotton fibre for extra warmth in winter.

How did the layers work and could you see the under layers?

All the main clothing layers are the same shape, with the under-kimono being slightly shorter. The different layers could be seen at the neck opening, wrist and hem as the person walked along. Choosing your layers – the harmonising or mixing of colours and designs - was

an important element in creating a fashionable ensemble. Japanese prints and paintings give us a good sense of this.

What would other classes wear? Would they have similar versions to the rich?

Did all kimono sweep along the ground?

All kimono are basically the same shape. The majority of people, even the quite wealthy, would have simply patterned cotton, or possibly hemp, kimono for everyday wear, silk kimono being preserved for special occasions. The samurai and merchant elite would have worn silk kimono far more of the time, while the poor might possess only one (non-silk) kimono. Everyday kimono would be worn to the ankle. The length of kimono can be adjusted at the waist (under the obi), but the silk kimono that sweep the floor are definitely special garments, worn predominantly indoors or, if outside, with high geta (shoes).

The kimono for the samurai woman has longer sleeves. Does that mean she is the daughter of a samurai?

The long sleeve garments worn by young unmarried women are called furisode, or 'swinging sleeves'. The opening for the wrist is still small, however. The sleeves are sewn to the body of the garment only over the shoulder not under the arms. Upon marriage a woman would adopt shorter sleeves. With the garment I showed near the beginning of my talk (one of those mounted on a mannequin in the exhibition), it is the sleeves that tell us the wearer was a young woman. The style of patterning tells us she was from the samurai class.

Could you comment on the similarities and differences between the kimono and a yukata?

Kimono is essentially an umbrella term, so it is not incorrect to call a yukata a kimono, although most Japanese would make the distinction. Yukatabira, shortened to yukata, originally referred to a similar garment, probably of hemp or ramie, used while bathing, but in the Edo period these tended to be made of cotton and were used after a bath and as informal summer garments. They remain popular today, especially for summer festivals.

Were piece-worker poor women employed to hand-sewn and repair and even clean the kimono?

Most of the people who worked in the kimono industry as weavers, dyers and embroiderers were men. Those who tailored the specially-commissioned garments into their finished form were also men. However, everyday kimono would be made from rolls of fabric purchased from kimono merchants. Women of the household might do the sewing themselves or, if they could afford it, employ a seamstress. In more rural areas, women often wove the cloth in the home, although dyeing was always carried out in specialist workshops by men. The repair and cleaning of kimono was also done by women of the household, or their servants, but also through the employment of a seamstress.

How did Japanese women in the past know about hot trends in kimono? Did they have something similar to fashion plates in 19th century?

Printed pattern books and the colourful woodblock prints were vital elements of the vibrant fashion culture of Edo-period Japan. It was through these, very inexpensive, means that fashion information and inspiration was circulated.

In the past how quickly would a kimono be considered to have gone out of fashion? (Style or fabric or length, embellishments etc). They are very expensive so was/is there a second hand market for them?

Elite households, such as those of senior samurai families, would order about 30 kimono at a time, twice a year, orders being placed in the opposite season to requirement. (Standard histories usually tell us Louis XIV invented the fashion 'season', but it happened in Japan slightly earlier). Each garment might only be worn about ten times, and never after the end of the year as this was considered bad luck. Samurai women could pass the previous year's kimono to their servants or give them as gifts, recipients safely treasuring and rarely wearing the garments. This is one reason why so many of the kimono that survive are those of samurai women. Most people could not afford to cast off expensive kimono so easily, however, but the wealthiest merchants would still sometimes pass on garments that were no longer the height of fashion. Luxury clothing was also donated to temples and shrines to assuage prayers for the departed. It would be kept for three years, after which it could be altered to make altar cloths and banners or even sold to second-hand merchants. There was quite a thriving second-hand market, garments being sold by specific shops or by peddlers. Essentially, it was like today: rich fashionistas are never caught in last season's designer clothes, but most people who can afford the occasional designer outfit treasure it. Everyone else buys second hand on ebay or other sites.

The last 20 years or so has seen quite a revival of second-hand kimono shops in Japan. You can pick up some wonderful garments at quite reasonable prices, particularly outside Tokyo and Kyoto (where they are always more expensive).

It seems the elements of Kimono were often borrowed in European fashion design. Can we say that the style of Kimono remains unaltered despite foreign influence? Why?

In Japanese dress culture, there is no relationship between the body and the garment, it is the surface that is the significant site of meaning – through colour, motif and techniques a wearer expresses gender, status, wealth and taste. The T-shape kimono was perfect for this, so once adopted it was never supplanted – except by the western styles themselves eventually. Foreign fabrics were used to create kimono, western textile technologies such as jacquard weaving and the use of chemical dyes were employed in the creation of kimono, and exciting foreign motifs were incorporated – but the shape remained the same.

How do you account for the continuing western fascination in such garments?

The kimono is unique in its lasting impact on western fashions and on the western imagination. In terms of the latter, the garment still retains something of its seventeenth century connotations of exotic luxury, something true even of the mass-produced kimono jackets sold by global high street stores. There is also a suggestion of the erotic, both through the western misunderstanding of geisha (virtually the only people in Japan who still wear formal, luxury kimono every day) which arose in the nineteenth century and, dating from the same period, the association with artistic bohemianism which evolved into the figure of the kimono -wearing femme fatale (such as Marlene Dietrich who wears a kimono in Shanghai Express, and the publicity shots for the film, even though it is set in China). It is also quite a performative garment (something that both Freddie Mercury and today's Topshop wearers know). There is something to be said for the fact that, although our present-day image of the kimono (as worn in Japan) suggests a complex, restrictive garment, it is actually a very easy, comfortable item to wear. And this forms part of the

impact it has had on western fashion. The kimono's shape - simple construction, flowing lines and sumptuous surfaces – and symbolic status – timeless, universal, exotic – have allowed it to be translated and transformed, deconstructed and re-constructed, ensuring its place as a uniquely flexible icon of both tradition and contemporaneity. Avant-garde Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto also draw from the fluid lines of the kimono and the principle that clothing has its own formative quality that is not subordinate to the body

Do you believe there is an emerging trend of "Asian-Futurism" similar to the emergence of Afro-Futurism wherein traditional Japanese iconography such as the kimono are being incorporated into futuristic imagery and styles?

This is not something I have particularly detected, but I think it is quite possible considering that the embracing of new technology is such a feature of textile production in Japan. You also see kimono-styles in futuristic manga and anime. But I think it is more likely to emerge within Japan, rather than in the East Asian diaspora (compared with Afrofuturism).

How do the colours of the kimono compare to how they looked at the time? e.g. vibrancy. What dyes were used?

The colours used to pattern fabric, as well as the silk threads used in embroidery, came predominantly from dyes extracted from vegetable sources, although pigments derived from minerals were also used. Some Kyoto dyes houses specialised in a single colour, but most produced a spectrum of hues. The dye recipes, which allowed for the creation of numerous shades and tones from what was a fairly limited number of plant sources, were carefully guarded secrets.

Bright light is the enemy of kimono and the majority have faded over time although some colours (such as red derived from safflower, called *benibana*) are more fugitive than others. There are also other problems, notably with some blacks and browns which are rather unstable, making garments fragile or leading to the loss of black embroidery. This is probably due to the high iron content in some of the mordants used. A remarkable thing about the kimono that Elizabeth Smith is wearing in her 1870s portrait, other than its actual survival, is that the colours are really vibrant because the garment has been kept in a trunk for most of its life.

Silk degrades and becomes acidic, how have the silk kimonos survived, what care techniques supported their preservation?

What conservation difficulties did you come across, such as with cleaning?

The kimono in the V&A collection have survived relatively well, although none (apart from a recent acquisition) predate the 1780s. The silk of some is very fragile however, and these garments cannot be displayed. All our kimono are stored flat, as far as possible, with acid free tissue between. Some of the older kimono we had first thought to borrow from Japan also proved too fragile to travel.

We have highly skilled textile conservators in the V&A and it is they who carry out the painstaking work to clean and stabilise the garments. If you are interested in seeing more of their work, I would recommend the recent BBC series 'Secrets of the Museum' (available on

oplayer). Textile conservators appear in every episode, with part of episode six dedicated to work carried out on one of the kimono in the exhibition.

In your opinion, for a modern fashion brand that wants to launch a local traditional clothing (such as a kimono) inspired collection, what might be the expected challenges, and how should they overcome them?

As I hoped I showed in my talk, kimono have long influenced global dress styles, but it is necessary to be sensitive to issues of cultural appropriation. It is important that kimono inspiration is about creative transformation based on appreciation of Japanese cultural and sartorial history, rather than superficial pastiche and cliché.

I have quite a few items that I have to wear. Do you have tips on how I can identify them? A book/ website or online?

There are a number of good books about kimono. These tend to focus on the Edo period, although more recent publications cover Meiji and Taisho/early Showa periods. I think if your garments are post Second World War, online resources are probably better. I do not know of one particular site to recommend, but there is an enthusiastic kimono community on social media.

I'd like to know if you have a particular favourite in the exhibition?

This is the hardest question to answer as so many of the kimono are remarkable. I am very fond of the very first object in the exhibition, the kimono for a young merchant woman from about 1800 from Joshibi Art Museum which has a stunning and very modern-looking pattern of irises by a dramatic red stream which flows back and forth across the surface of the garment. I first saw this garment illustrated in books, so it was a great treat to see it in real life for the first time about five years ago and I am very happy we were able to borrow it. Since cross-cultural interactions are a key theme of the V&A exhibition, another favourite is the woman's kimono made from French brocade. Although not as dramatic in appearance as many garments in the exhibition it is, as far as I know, unique. I first saw it at the home of collector Kojirō Yoshida, in Kyoto in 2002. I popped by just to say hello on a visit to the city on a snowy January day in 2017 and he told me he had a present for me (well for the V&A really) and, much to my delight, he donated it and the man's blue samurai garment featured in the BBC programme.

Of the western-made garments, I like the dramatic 1920s kimono-style coat made of strips of black and white silk and with outrageously long sleeves of different lengths. It is believed to have been designed by Emilie Flöge, a leading member of the Viennese avant-garde and close friend of Gustav Klimt, and we borrowed it from collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute. When it comes to the contemporary, the John Galliano pieces for his 2007 Dior collection – which I had only encountered in images prior to the exhibition itself – are utterly remarkable.

One of the pleasures of the exhibition has been getting to know the modern kimono makers. Particular favourites are the sophisticated couture designs of Jōtarō Saitō (which I wore for the opening of the exhibition) and the edgy yukata of Rumi Rock (which I was wearing for my talk).

Does your interest in the Kimono extend to having a personal collection and pleasure in wearing them?

I did possess a few kimono before the exhibition, but didn't wear them. Travelling to Japan a number of times while researching and planning the exhibition, it was impossible to resist buying more. For someone who spends much of their life in plain black, grey and white, kimono buying opened up an incredible world of colour and pattern. Because the form of the kimono is not related to the form of the body, it doesn't matter what shape you are (although vintage ones do tend to be quite narrow). Kimono can also be styled in many ways (depending on choice of obi, accessories, shoes etc) meaning it is a highly individual form of dress. So I now have a collection of about five vintage kimono, four by contemporary kimono designers, plus five kimono jackets which are easy to wear over western clothes. I was planning to wear these garments during the run of the exhibition, but have been sadly denied this opportunity. So it was good to have an excuse to wear one, at home, for my talk.