


THE
Kimono
INSPIRATION



ART AND ART-TO-WEAR IN AMERICA


The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.

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INSPIRATION



ART AND ART-TO-WEAR IN AMERICA

Edited by Rebecca A. T. Stevens
and Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada

The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.
Pomegranate Artbooks ■ San Francisco



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THE
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I N S P I R A T I O N





James Abbott McNeill Whistler
(American, 1834–1903)
*Rose and Silver: The Princess
from the Land of Porcelain*,
1863–1864
Oil on canvas, 80 x 46½ in.
Freer Gallery of Art
Smithsonian Institution 03.91

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Foreword

The Kimono Inspiration: Art and Art-to-Wear in America explores the influence of the Japanese kimono on American artists, focusing on the contemporary appropriation of the kimono form by creators of art-to-wear. Although many American museums have presented exhibitions on the traditional Japanese kimono or on the impact of the Japanese aesthetic on Western art (i.e., *Japonisme*), this is the first exhibit to examine the relationship between the two subjects and document the emergence of the kimono as an American art form and symbol. It is with great pleasure that The Textile Museum presents this exhibition, which places the American use of the kimono in its historical and cross-cultural context.

The kimono, worn by aristocratic and wealthy Japanese women for hundreds of years, exudes a sense of beauty, grace, sensuality, and mystery to the Western world. It has intrigued the Europeans and Americans since the mid-nineteenth century, when Japan opened its borders. Artists of every discipline have become aware of the kimono's timeless beauty and, in various ways over the years, have made it a part of their repertoire.

The kimono's roots reach back to the days when Japan was a closed and self-contained society. Even today in Japan, while Western garments are worn in the working world, the kimono is still worn at weddings and on other special occasions. Some have been handed down from one generation to the next; others are new, but no less beautiful. With its classic shape and simple lines, the kimono lends itself to embellishment and ornamentation. It still attracts and inspires artists, from both the East and the West, who devise new and innovative ways to use the kimono's form.

The works in this exhibition show how an ancient Japanese shape has been explored and reinvented by American artists. Inspiration has led each artist to develop a unique approach to and meaning of this classic form. And in the future, we will undoubtedly see other ideas evolve. Japan has enriched the world by sharing its treasure—the kimono.

—Eleanor T. Rosenfeld,
Trustee, The Textile Museum

Preface

THE KIMONO INSPIRATION

The Japanese have a talent for incorporating beauty into daily life. Modern, industrial Japan, like industrial countries everywhere, must cope with the look of industrialization and its emphasis on mass production and expedience, which often overwhelm aesthetics, including consideration of balance and form. Yet every day, one encounters evidence of Japan's traditional concern for having beautiful things at hand: wonderfully crafted little *bashi-oki* on which to rest one's chopsticks, invitations printed on densely textured handmade paper in a seasonal hue, shapely roof tiles, translucent tea bowls. This historic concern—that what we lay our eyes and hands on should look and feel right—is a consideration I share from my work with clay. Since I arrived in Japan, it has been a daily pleasure to see that much of the traditional care taken in crafting useful objects still remains.

In the United States, I had the good fortune to be an advocate for American art and artists. And the more I get to know Japan through its art and crafts, the more I am convinced of the importance for nations to communicate in and discuss this artistic realm of life.

For almost fifty years, relations between Japan and the United States have been good, strong, and increasingly important to both countries. Perhaps our mutual respect and cooperation will make a difference in how peaceful and how prosperous the world will be in the future. Yet even now, while our ties are close, complex, and varied, our histories, geographies, languages, and much else about our two societies differ greatly. Because of this, it is easy to misunderstand one another, and finding means of communication that go beyond cultural differences is critical. I have always believed that the strength of the arts lies in their ability to pierce cultural blinders and reveal doorways in unexpected places. So I am pleased to contribute to a book that points to the influence of Japanese design on Western art. We hear and see a great deal about how Japanese culture has been transformed by its contact with the West, but we tend to forget that both sides have received something.

Of all the beautiful things one can see in use in Japan, the kimono is probably the boldest and most visually appealing. As clothing, it is considered too difficult and

impractical to wear much anymore, and so the rare pleasure of seeing a group of kimono-clad women on the New Year or some other holiday offers a hint of how the emperor's court must have looked. In the recent Royal Wedding of Crown Prince Naruhito, one could see the beginnings of the contemporary kimono dating from the Heian period (794–1185), when the elite accomplished the art of being graceful in twelve-layer kimonos that could weigh more than thirty-five pounds.

The first Europeans to land in Japan were amazed by the local dress. There is little wonder that, when the fabrics were brought home, European artists were absolutely taken with designs and patterns

that were new to them but so pleasing at first sight. I have only recently learned that the Japanese kimono industry was, in turn, revolutionized by the Europeans who brought with them to Japan new weaving methods—another lesson in the compound benefits of international contact and cross-cultural exchange.

Japan and the United States are two dynamic nations with much to give to the world, and much to learn from each other. The journey of kimono design from traditional Japanese dress to inspiration for American art traces one path in our growing mutual appreciation and understanding.

—Joan Mondale

THE WORLD IS GETTING SMALLER

After a fifteen-year absence, I returned to the United States in 1992. That was enough time to observe that the world is indeed getting smaller. Before, when we reflected upon this fact, we usually meant the convenience of traveling to another country by airplane. Today, when we express this sentiment, we are not only referring to our advanced means of transportation and communication, but to a way of life and thinking and to the cultural influences of the arts that affect the closeness of our interpersonal relationships.

Since my return to Washington, D.C., I have frequently visited the "Torpedo Factory" in nearby Alexandria, Virginia. The Factory is a beautifully designed art gallery, in which artists each have a small studio or room to display and sell their work. In this gallery, I see the influence of Japan and Japanese traditional arts. The shape and color of the pottery are very close to those of Japanese pottery. Teapots and coffee cups are very similar to Japanese tea sets with their simple, delicate, and pastel-colored patterns.

During a recent visit to the White House, I saw many contemporary American crafts exhibited there. And, to my amazement, I discovered that some of the pottery was decorated in exquisite colors of gold, red, dark green, and pale black—color schemes that very much remind me of kimono fabrics from almost ten centuries ago.

I remember that in the postwar years, Japan exported to the United States a large volume of silk materials as well as

sold them as souvenirs to foreign visitors, most of them Americans. To attract American customers in those days, we thought that we had to make colorful materials with large patterns, which seemed too gaudy for most Japanese to wear. In retrospect, that may have been our misunderstanding. Now I know that Americans also love traditional Japanese materials with simple patterns and colors such as blue and white.

At parties in Washington, I often meet American women wearing pretty dresses made out of kimono or *obi* sash material. By observing these dresses, I am learning new ideas for ways to use our traditional fabrics. I also had the occasion to meet a well-known American dress designer, who showed me one of her originally designed kimono dresses. When she told me she had never been to Japan, I was speechless. I could not believe that somebody who had not experienced living in Japan could design such a very Japanese dress. So, it seems, the beauty of a tradition can transcend the time and culture from which it originated and become contemporary and international.

A tradition can also have a powerful effect on the state of mind as well as the behavior of individuals exposed to it. One of my daughters, who married recently in Washington, D.C., wore a kimono during the latter half of her wedding reception. Our guests seemed surprised to see her behave in such a traditional Japanese manner, after seeing her behave like any young American girl when she wore a white

wedding gown earlier in the ceremony. Maybe as a young woman of Japanese origin—even though she has lived in this country long enough to be acquainted with the American lifestyle—she still unconsciously remembers the Japanese traditions that the kimono has carried for centuries. For special occasions, I also wear a kimono—the national dress—which makes me, too, feel a part of our cultural tradition. The kimono elicits from me certain gestures and behaviors that make me feel very Japanese.

Cultural interaction is a two-way process. Japan's increased exposure to Western culture has influenced kimono patterns and their colors in various ways. First, the patterns are no longer only of natural beauty, like trees and birds, but are often abstract designs. Second, the colors of the fabrics are no longer necessarily related to the age of the person who wears them. During my mother's generation, once a woman reached the age of thirty she did not wear red or bright colors. But today there is no special connection between the color and a person's age. And third, our way of wearing the kimono has changed and become more contemporary. We have two-piece kimonos that are as easy to wear as blouses and skirts. Even "ready to wear" tied *obi* are available to put on like sash belts.

The true culture and art of any heritage is not separated by national boundaries. Culture goes beyond physical borders and makes people more open to, and familiar with, different values that can enrich their lives. When cultures meet one another,

they can expand or even create new traditions. In old Japanese history, much was learned from neighboring countries such as Korea and China. It is very easy to observe many similarities in our traditions whose origins can be traced to our Asian neighbors. The black ships of Commodore Perry opened the door of Japan in 1854 not only to international commerce, but also to Western culture, which profoundly changed the traditional Japanese way of life. The postwar impact of American culture on Japan has been even greater and wider, from the political values of freedom and democracy to the social value of privacy and a more convenient way of living. But this cultural impact has been two-way. From architecture to food to fashion, the influence of Japanese culture can now be seen everywhere in America.

Last year was the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. We shall not forget that tragic page in the history of our relations. But we also commemorate the last half-century of our friendly and productive relationship, and I cannot but hope that the ties between our two countries will become even closer and further strengthened by mutual understanding, which is best promoted through cultural interchanges. The Textile Museum's exhibition "The Kimono Inspiration: Art and Art-to-Wear in America" certainly contributes to that end.

The world continues to grow even smaller through cultural communications between all peoples.

—Masako "Mimi" Kuriyama

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