The Japanese Kimono

a historical essay

by Anne Rose Kitagawa

Introduction

The following essay outlines the history of the Japanese kimono—that most elegant and sophisticated of garments—over the past three thousand years. The Art Institute of Chicago houses a small but selective collection of Japanese textiles, including some of the finest kimono outside of Japan.[1] Many are objects of extraordinary beauty, craftsmanship, and cultural significance. Like most pieces in an art museum, these kimono reflect the affluence and tastes of the wealthiest members of society, since only the most "important" (hence expensive) objects are usually deemed precious enough to warrant preservation.

The clothing that a society chooses to wear tells a great deal about that society as a whole. While studying the long and varied history of the kimono we will learn a lot about Japan, its cultural history, and many related values and beliefs.

Japan (see **Map** on page 4) is a mountainous chain of islands located off the eastern coast of Korea, southwest of the eastern edge of the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former U.S.S.R.). Characterized by low, rolling hills and abundant forests, the landscape of Japan is varied and beautiful. Arable land is relatively scarce, and many areas are difficult to cultivate. The Japanese are most likely descendants of a mixture of continental peoples from the Asian mainland and an older indigenous population, who are now represented only in the very far north by the Ainu (a caucasoid aboriginal people once culturally and ethnically distinct from the Japanese but who have all but disappeared as a discrete group[2]). Living in an area prone to earthquakes, tidal waves, and heavy seasonal rains, the Japanese developed a resilient and fascinating culture, alternately interacting with and insulating themselves from outside influences. Often chafing at its reputation as a cultural emulator of China, Japan has in fact learned a great deal from her sophisticated and influential continental neighbor. However, the Japanese have so consistently put their own "spin" on their appropriations, that their culture must be recognized as unique and distinct.

The history of the kimono exemplifies the Japanese adoption of technological skills from China, including cultivation of silkworms, spinning, and weaving of silk, which were perfected over generations. Kimono production also exemplifies the specialization of labor which has made Japan such an avid competitor in the late twentieth-century global economy, since similar principles of the division of labor and expertise among many individuals also underlie modern Japanese products such as microchips, automobiles, and stereos.

Japanese Kimono Etiquette

Kimono, literally "the thing worn," is a very generalized modern Japanese word which encompasses a wide variety of traditional Japanese garments more properly referred to by their specific names (e.g. *surihaku, kosode*, *furisode*, etc.).

The Japanese have a highly developed and elaborate sense of clothing etiquette. Traditionally, a person's dress was a statement to her or his peers, visually signifying not only the wearer's age, social and marital status, profession, and activity, but also the season (conveyed through the decorative designs as well as weight of the fabric) and even the wearer's mood. Everything about a robe—the length of its sleeves, its weave, the type of cloth, its color and decoration—contributes to this formal syntax of attire. In addition, the patterns and motifs meticulously woven into and embroidered onto such a garment often contain subtle allusions to seasonal poetry or classical legends.

Because we live in a period when relatively sturdy and well-tailored clothing is mass-produced and readily available to a wide consumer clientele, it is difficult for us to understand the preciously individual nature of these sumptuous kimono. Each garment had to be custom tailored, made by hand, and usually designed in conjunction with the wearer as a direct reflection of her/his sensibilities. Yet even today we infer a great deal about people by what they choose to wear.[3]

Strict rules govern how and when a person (usually a woman) can wear a particular kimono. As mentioned above, there are colors and patterns considered appropriate to particular occasions or phases of a person's life. For example, a married woman tends to wear kimono with smaller patterned ornamentation and shorter sleeves than an unmarried woman, whose brightly colored, boldly patterned, long-sleeved *furisode* connotes her freedom, attractiveness, and availability.

From early times in Japan, delicately ornamented textiles were used widely, not only to cover the body, but also as an economic and personal commodity. Bolts of silk and finished kimono were traded in exchange for both debts and gifts and were even used in payment of taxes.

Jomon (10,500 - 200 B.C.E.), **Yoyoi** (200 B.C.E. - 250 C.E.), **and Kofun periods** (250 - 552 C.E.)

The pre-Bronze Age culture of Japan developed rapidly, probably due to strong cultural influences from the Asian mainland. We know very little of the clothing worn during the Jomon period (10,500 - 200 B.C.E. of the Neolithic phase), named for the characteristic *jomon* or cord-marked pottery, save what can be inferred from scraps of plaited bark fibers, polished bone needles, and one recent and virtually unprecedented archaeological find. While excavating an ancient shell mound (a place where prehistoric Japanese dumped their refuse) which dates roughly to the fourth millennium B.C.E., archaeologists found a fragment of coarse Jomon period cloth made from carefully twined and knitted nettle fibers. Similar fabrics have been produced ever since that time in some rural parts of Japan, but only with the 1986 excavation was the antiquity of the process fully appreciated.

Figure 1
Han Tomb Figure
China

During the Yayoi period (200 B.C.E. - 250 C.E.) the Japanese absorbed many influences from the Asian mainland. Rice cultivation, bronze casting, iron technology, glassmaking, and advanced methods of woodworking all point to strong continental influence. It is commonly believed that due to this increased contact with China and Korea, the Japanese wore simple, square cut robes, similar to those seen on early Chinese tomb figurines (**Fig. 1**).

Figure 2
Haniwa Woman
Japan; Late Kofun period, C.E. 6th century; Excavated at Tsukamawari 3 Kofun, Gumma Prefecture; Earthenware with painted decoration; H. 78.7 cm
Important Cultural Property

During the ensuing Kofun or Old Tumulus period (250 - 552 B.C.E.), people seem to have worn distinctive, simply-cut tunics decorated with bold geometric patterns. These garments are depicted on clay figures (Haniwa) which were placed around a grave mound or tumulus (**Fig. 2**). On the other hand, the painted figures depicted on the walls of Takamatsuzuka (a recently excavated Kofun period tomb in Asuka, Japan) wear essentially Korean garments (**Fig. 3**).

Figure 3
Takamatsuzuka Woman
Japan; Nara period, c. 719-729 Takamatsuzuka Tomb; Asuka Prefecture; Wall Painting; Ink and colors on plaster
National Treasure

The early Japanese must certainly have been aware of silk from ancient China. Silk is the fine, soft, shiny filament produced by silk worms while they form their cocoons. The Chinese produced silk from the Shang dynasty (1700 - 1050 B.C.E.), if not earlier, and the West introduced this precious commodity during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. - C.E. 220). The Chinese carefully guarded the source of silk production. In order to make silk, the Chinese cultivated silkworms, which they fed a steady diet of mulberry leaves, and then boiled and painstakingly unravelled the cocoons to produce this finest of natural fibers. The Japanese knew of silk through their trade with China and their interaction with Chinese settlers who brought the secrets of silk-making with them to Japan.[4]

Asuka (538 - 645) and Nara (645 - 794) periods

Figure 4
Nara Women's Clothing
Japan; Nara period, late 7th-early 8th century; Long sleeved robe; high-waisted skirt; brocade vest; gauze shawl

Japanese written records begin in the Nara period (645 - 794), although the Chinese had mentioned Japan centuries earlier. A collection of indigenous ruling families organized over time into an aristocracy on the model of Tang dynasty (618 - 907) China. Buddhism made its way from the Asian mainland to Japan during the sixth century. This ancient religion originated in the teachings of the Nepalese prince Shakyamuni Gautama (sixth century B.C.E.) who stressed the importance of acknowledging the non-reality of the physical world and the potential for enlightenment through disciplined self-cultivation. Although never committed to writing during his lifetime, Shakyamuni's philosophical teachings spread with hundreds of missionaries and pilgrims who travelled along the Silk Road[5] which extended across Central Asia from China. In time, these pilgrims found their way to Korea and Japan. Initially viewed with trepidation by the Japanese aristocracy, Buddhism was eventually adopted as a state religion, and successfully blended over the ensuing centuries with Shinto and Japanese religious and folk beliefs—which stressed purity, sacred space, and the changing of seasons.

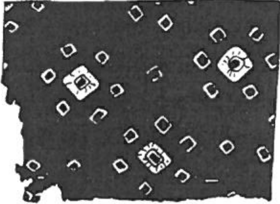


Figure 5
Textile Fragment
Japan; Asuka period, 7th century
Horyu-ji; Nara Prefecture

During the Asuka (538-645) and Nara periods (both named for their respective capitals) Chinese influence on Japan was quite strong, as is exemplified by the belongings of the Japanese emperor Shomu (701 - 756) which were deposited after his death into the Shoso-in, a treasure house at the important Buddhist temple Todai-ji[6] in Nara. Shomu's empress Komyo placed all of his ritual objects and daily utensils into this storehouse, where they have remained amazingly intact to the present. Most of these beautiful artifacts are either of Chinese origin, or are based on Chinese styles. The Tang dynasty was truly the height of China's political power and cultural prestige, and the newly inaugurated Japanese state quickly fell under the sway of Tang fashions in painting, sculpture, ceramics, metalwork, and, of course, textiles. The Shoso-in houses numerous examples of Chinese silk, many worked into beautifully finished garments in the Tang style (**Figs. 4, 5, and 6**).

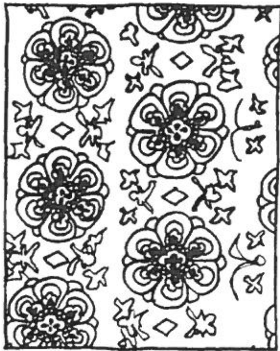


Figure 6
Textile Fragment
Japan; Nara period, mid 8th-century; Shoso-in; Todai-ji; Nara Prefecture; Silk polychrome brocade

It was also during the Asuka and Nara periods that fabric, especially silk, began to be used as currency. Taxes took many forms, including those paid in rice, other produce, labor, and silk, which no doubt contributed to the establishment of a weaving industry that later developed into one of the most sophisticated ever known.

Heian period (794-1185)

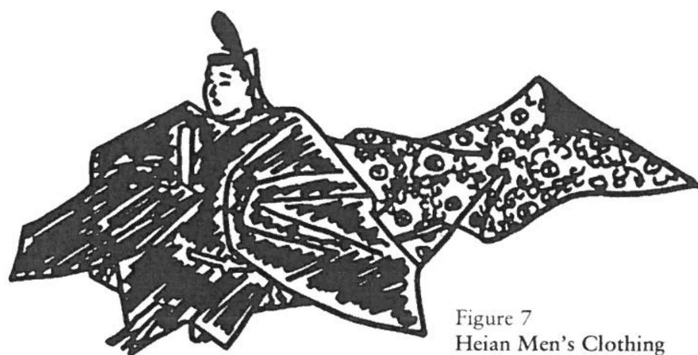


Figure 7
Heian Men's Clothing
Japan; Heian period, 10th-century; *Sokutai* belted tunic and stiffened trousers over *kosode*; with train

The Heian period (794 - 1185), named for the capital city of Heian-kyo (modern Kyoto), is often regarded as the height of Japanese refinement. Japan's strong cultural ties with China were largely severed during this period, when the Japanese perceived that the Tang dynasty had fallen on hard times and decided that the Chinese were no longer worthy of emulation. This period saw a striking "Japanization" of taste. The Heian court, supported entirely through the labors of a peasantry which lived in incredibly squalid conditions, had the free time and affluence to develop almost perversely aestheticized sensibilities. Quite apart from the strict ranking of courtly colors which had been established during the Asuka period (based on a Chinese system but enlarged and augmented in Japan), the aristocrats of the Heian court were acutely sensitive to nuances of color, tone, scent, and sound. They were also deeply moved by poetry based on the inevitable "transience of things" (*mono no aware*) and the Buddhist-inspired sense of evanescence which they perceived to permeate every aspect of their existence.

Figure 8
Heian Women's Clothing
Japan; Heian period, 10th-century; *Junihitoe* multiple layered robes over *kosode*; with train

Besides being physically attractive, people of this rarified society were expected to know a vast store of classical Japanese poetry by heart; to be able to spontaneously recite (or write in a flawless calligraphic hand) elegant original verses in response to these classical prototypes; to play at least one musical instrument with distinction; to recognize a number of exotic and expensive aromatic scents from the merest whiff of incense; to paint cleverly and to provide witty conversation for their contemporaries.

A court attendant's choice of clothing was seen as a visible extension of her or his multifaceted talents, and had to reflect the subtlety indicative of good breeding. Heian men wore robes not unlike those of the Nara period, except that extra fabric was used and even stiffened in order to give the courtier's silhouette a broader and hence more stately appearance (**Fig. 7**). Heian women wore heavy, elaborate multi-layered silk garments now referred to as *junihitoe* (which means literally "twelve unlined robes," although during the Heian period they often wore up to forty! **Fig. 8**). Since only the sleeve edges of most of the *junihitoe* layers were visible, it would seem to most of us in the twentieth century to have been more trouble and expense than it was worth to carefully choose and arrange so many brightly colored garments. Not so during the Heian period, when a glimpse of the tastefully arranged sleeves of a court lady seen at the base of her

screen of state (which would always hide her from the prying gaze of all men outside of her immediate family) was enough to send a potential lover reeling and often provided the impetus for a characteristically bittersweet, poetic love affair.

Many Heian poems use clothing imagery. For example, "dew-drenched sleeves" could mean that a person had wept for so long that her/his entire sleeve was soaked with tears. Since courtiers also slept under many layers of clothing, Heian love poetry is rife with wistful verses recalling the lingering fragrance of a lover's perfume on one's bedding the morning after an encounter. Countless pages of Heian literature are devoted to the detailed enumeration of the specific shades and patterns on the garments worn by the protagonists. Such description seems excessive in translation, but was designed to tell the fashion-savvy contemporary audience about those characters' innate sensibilities and their inner states.

Such obsession with cultivated self-expression and flaunting of material wealth did not bode well for the Heian aristocrats. Unaware of their waning political influence, they became increasingly introverted, devoting their attentions to their privileged, cloistered, artistic pursuits. Over time, the Heian court came to rely increasingly upon provincial armed warrior families to collect the taxes upon which their livelihood depended. This reliance upon military strongmen spelled the eventual demise of the Heian court and also signaled the decline of Japanese imperial power.

Figure 9
Kamakura *Kosode*
Japan; Kamakura period, 14th-century

Kamakura period (1185 - 1333)

The political supremacy of the overly aestheticized Heian court was soon overshadowed by samurai (warriors) who exerted military control first in the provinces, and then established a shogunate (military dictatorship) in the town of Kamakura. During the Kamakura period (1185 - 1333), the first shogun, Minamoto Yoritomo (1147 - 1199), did not depose the emperor, but rather ruled around him, maintaining the imperial family as a powerless figurehead. The excesses of the Heian aristocracy were severely curtailed, and a new frugality was favored by the shogunate.

Partly as a result of this power struggle, the *junihitoe* fell out of fashion. In its place the *kosode* ("small sleeves," referring to the opening for the hand and not to the sleeve length), previously worn underneath the multiple layers of Heian women's clothing, became outerwear (**Fig. 9**). *Kosode* afforded women a new-found freedom of move-

ment and were soon produced in many specially brocaded, dyed, and embroidered fabrics. Men also wore *kosode*, though not quite so prominently, since theirs were partly hidden underneath a matching top and full pleated trousers (**Fig. 10**).

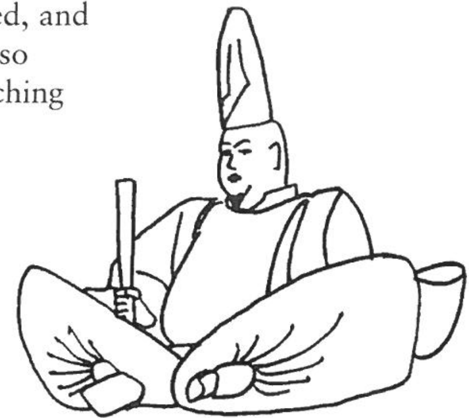


Figure 10
Kamakura Men's Clothing
Japan; Kamakura period, 12th-century; *Kariginu* hunting tunic and stiffened trousers over *kosode*; *eboshi* hat

The kimono as we now know it is the descendant of these Kamakura period *kosode*, and the garment has changed remarkably little in shape over time. Since the Kamakura period, major trends in kimono fashion tend to be changes in the arrangement of patterns on this *kosode* garment, developments in dyeing or embroidering techniques, changes in characteristic color combinations, or changes in sash width or pattern. The cut of the robe, always made economically from square-cut full widths of cloth sewn flat and adjusted lengthwise by a sash or *obi*[7], remained consistent.

Although the Kamakura shoguns were eventually ousted, similar forms of military rule were established with varying degrees of success during the next five hundred years. The shogunate system was abolished soon after Japan was forcibly opened to the outside world in the nineteenth century.

Muromachi (1333 - 1573) and Momoyama (1573 - 1615) periods

The Muromachi period (1333 - 1573) was the second shogunal dynasty, established by the warrior Ashikaga Takauji (1305 - 1358) in the old capital city of Kyoto (Heiankyo of the Heian period). The Ashikaga shoguns were very active in trade with China and also patronized many Chinese Chan (Japanese: Zen) Buddhist monks who sought refuge from the "barbarian" Yuan dynasty (1280 - 1368) by establishing Zen temples in Japan. The shoguns also collected Chinese paintings, ceramics, and bronzes, and patronized the newly established Noh theater.

Noh was derived from a variety of ancient folk and ritual dances as interpreted by Zeami (c. 1364 - c. 1443), a brilliant young actor and playwright favored by the third Muromachi shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358 - 1408). Long, slow-paced, and performed by strictly trained masked actors on a bare stage decorated only with a huge painted pine in the background, Noh seems quite static to the Western viewer unprepared for the subtle intensity of the medium. Still retain-

ing much of its ritual character, Noh incorporates stylized dance, music, and pantomime in a cadenced narrative format. Since Noh is performed on a bare stage with a minimum of props, the brilliance of the actors' costumes is essential to the drama. Most Noh plays are based on tales of classical origin and emphasize the transience of worldly attachments, once again showing strong Buddhist undertones.

Figure 11
Aoinue
Tsukioka Kogyo (1869-1927)
Japan; Taisho period, early 20th-century; Woodblock print
Bequest of Henry C. Schwab Estate; 1943.834

Because the focus of Noh is concentrated in the subtle movements of the actor, costumes are of the utmost importance. In this all-male theater, garments and elaborately carved wooden masks were used to establish a character's gender, personality, profession, and social status, as well as to make clear her or his existential identity (e.g. human, god, or demon).[8] Noh robes serve as moving scenery in a relatively static theatrical medium. Most display symbolism with heightened poetic meaning, for example the stylized scales on the robe seen in **Fig. 11** and **Slide 11** which suggest the evil serpentine nature of the possessing spirit of the court lady Rokujo no kimi.[9] Kimono are also sometimes used to symbolize people. In the same print, the limp and lifeless form of the woman possessed by Rokujo's vengeful spirit is symbolized by the empty kimono lying on the floor at the actor's feet. In another famous play, *Izutsu*, the wife of a deceased courtier dons his clothing and then sees her late husband's reflection in her own by the well that was the setting for their first encounter. Such clothing imagery is rampant in Noh, continuing in the time-honored poetic tradition of the Heian period.[10]

The sumptuous robes used in Noh were originally no different from the elegant garments worn by the theater's wealthy warrior patrons. Such exquisite (outer) robes were often proffered by enthusiastic audience members to their favorite actors, in appreciation of a particularly riveting performance. Such gifts would be absorbed into the troupe's theatrical wardrobe, a dramatic continuation of the idea of textiles as currency but with added layers of poetic symbolism.

The Muromachi shoguns eventually lost their political power and remained only as figureheads during a period of intensely divisive civil wars, until the last Ashikaga shogun was officially deposed by Oda Nobunaga (1534 - 1582), the first of Japan's so-called Three Great Unifiers. The other two were Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537 - 1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543 - 1616). The Momoyama period (1573 - 1615), named for Nobunaga's estate on Peach Hill in Kyoto, during which these three great warriors extended their control across Japan was one of varied and often contradictory influences. Characterized

on the one hand by bombastic pattern and overt bravado, this period also saw the rise of extremely astringent and subdued "Tea Taste" and consciously imperfect, exorbitantly expensive, "rustic" pottery. Christianity was also introduced and gained a certain momentum on the Japanese archipelago. Whether this was due to true Christian faith (as opposed to the Japanese fascination with the firearms that came with the Portuguese and Spanish missionaries), is not entirely clear.[11]

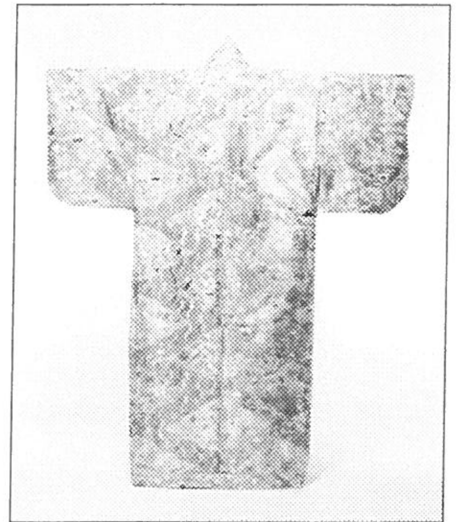


Figure 12
***Nuihaku* (Noh Costume)**
Japan; Momoyama period, 16th-century; Restricted gift of Mrs. C.H. Worchester; 1928.814

One of the great strengths of the Art Institute's kimono collection is a group of elegant Noh costumes. The oldest is a sixteenth-century *Nuihaku* (**Fig. 12** and **Slide 1**). It is one of the two oldest Noh robes known to be in existence, and the only one outside of Japan. The sleeves of this exquisite *Nuihaku* were originally shorter. At a later date, when fashion called for longer sleeves, sections of another (sixteenth century) robe were added. Aside from a few inches of fabric added at the hemline, the garment is intact and original, though the originally brilliant colors have faded. The designs and colors on the left and right sides of the garment vary slightly. One side has snow-laden willows in the lozenge-shaped frames; the other, miniature landscapes inside framed medallions.

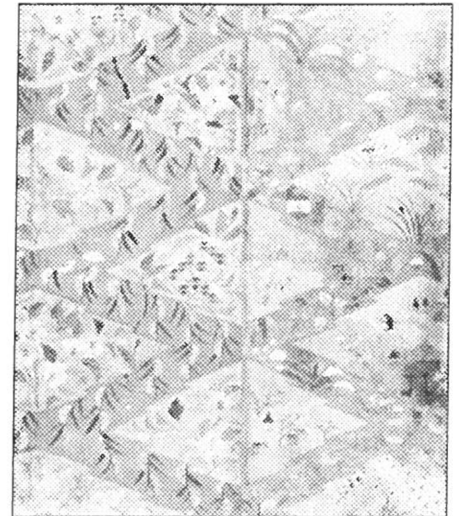


Figure 13
Detail of figure 12

Imagery from classical Japanese literature abounds in these decorative designs. For example, the lovely iris plants, combined with multiple footbridges (just visible on the right of **Fig. 13**), allude to a scene in a famous anthology, in which a celebrated poet (renowned in part for his many love affairs) pauses at the site of eight bridges in a rural setting in order to compose a nostalgic verse bemoaning the lover he left behind in the capital.

> *I have a beloved wife,*
> *Familiar as the skirt*
> *Of a well-worn robe,*
> *And so this distant journeying*
> *Fills my heart with grief*[12]

This poem is an acrostic because the first syllable of each line (in the Japanese) "spells" *kakitsubata*, or iris[13]. The visual image on the *nuihaku*, ostensibly a simple landscape, contains multiple layers of poetic allusion to classical themes. An amazing number of such classicizing details reward close observation of the Art Institute's *Nuihaku*, yet the vast array of individual motifs is lovingly balanced within an elegant overall pattern.

Edo period (1615 - 1868)

Figure 14
Women's Work in Silk Culture: Setting the Moths Free
Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806)
Japan; Edo period, c. 1802
Woodblock print; Clarence Buckingham Collection of Japanese Prints; 1925.3253

The Edo, or Tokugawa period (1615 - 1868), so called because the Tokugawa shoguns chose the northern city of Edo (modern Tokyo) as their capital, saw many changes in Japanese culture. All of the kimono considered thus far have been garments made under the auspices of the uppermost echelon of Japanese society, either for the courtly aristocracy or the military retainers of the shogun's entourage, but for the first time during the Edo period we begin to see signs of a vibrant non-aristocratic, though undeniably wealthy, urban culture.

Originally, the Tokugawa shoguns stratified Japanese society into four distinct groups: the samurai (warrior elite) at the highest level, followed by farmers, artisans, and merchants. Merchants were at the bottom of this social ranking because they did not produce anything, but rather capitalized upon the toil of others. Yet over the course of the Edo period this theoretical ordering of society no longer corresponded to economic reality because the merchant class came to control a considerable proportion of the nation's wealth. Denied access to political power, these urban merchants spent their money lavishly on both culture and frivolity. This extravagant young culture became a separate world in itself, and was dubbed *ukiyo*, the "Floating World," aptly characterizing this ever changing arena of fashion and entertainment.

Figure 15
after ***Otokodate (Chivalrous Man)***; from the series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*
Tsukioka Yoshitoshi
Japan, Meiji period, dated 1887
Woodblock print

Fashion during the Edo period was dominated by prostitutes from the licensed brothel district, Yoshiwara, on the one hand and Kabuki actors on the other. Although they were indentured into brothels as children with little hope of ever living as ordinary women, the highest ranking courtesans of the Yoshiwara could refuse unwelcome patrons and were unquestionably the most admired and envied women of the age (**Fig. 14 and Slide 12**). The most lavish and flamboyant of the all-male Japanese theatrical forms (in striking contrast to the relative stasis of Noh) is Kabuki. Kabuki combines sheer spectacle, expressive artistry, opulent costume, violent dramatic action, and sometimes vulgar comedy into an intricately interwoven narrative pattern of acting, singing, and dancing. The kimono worn by Kabuki actors tend toward the bombastic, with bright, bold patterns and intense, sometimes shocking color combinations (**Fig. 15**).

Textile technology reached a zenith of variety and creativity as these stylish women and men vied with one another to acquire and wear the most elegant, up-to-date, and outrageous fashions. Japanese woodblock prints from this period (of which the Art Institute of Chicago has a world-famous collection) are very useful to students of Japanese textiles, because they meticulously record even the smallest details of these rapidly changing fashions. The Tokugawa government became

so alarmed at the conspicuous consumption by members of this "floating world" that strict laws were enacted, in the hope of curtailing what was perceived as an embarrassing extravagance. During the period, merchants were repeatedly told that they could not wear silk, should not display ostentatiously decorated robes, and should not use gold or silver in their garments. These sumptuary laws were ignored. Wily merchants merely worked around the sumptuary laws by lining simple cotton garments with the richest fabrics or by wearing robes which were deceptively simple in appearance but which were extremely labor-intensive to produce. Brocaded fabrics, ikat dyed textiles, *shibori* (tie-dye), stencil, and resist-dyeing; needlework—any number of textile weaving, dyeing, and decorating techniques were used in this quest for self-expression. Kimono pattern books[14] were also produced (**Fig. 16**) which provided the decorative design for some extant robes (**Fig. 17** and **Slide 8**).

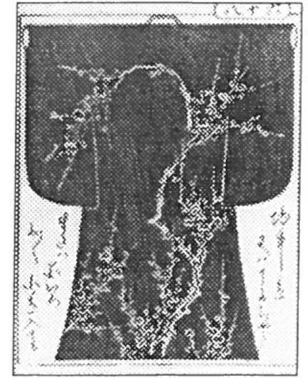


Figure 16
Page from a Kimono Pattern Book
from *Hinagata Yado No Ume (Patterns: The Plum Tree of Our Home);* Tagagi Kosuke; Banryuken; Manjiken Nakajima Tanjiro: Himekiya Magobei, artists; Japan; Edo period, dated 1730; Woodblock printed book; ink on paper; 25.7 x 18.5 cm; Ryerson Library 761.952 K866

In part because the Tokugawa period is relatively recent, the Art Institute owns a wealth of Edo kimono. Aside from an extensive collection of Noh garments, the museum houses a number of exquisite garments which would have been worn in everyday life. Kimono, like the colorful nineteenth century *furisode* (**Fig. 18** and **Slide 7**), were worn by young girls on special occasions. The skills of many individual textile workers were required to produce such a robe: weavers, dyers, embroiderers, and tailors all strove in unison to create the sumptuous and innovative designs.

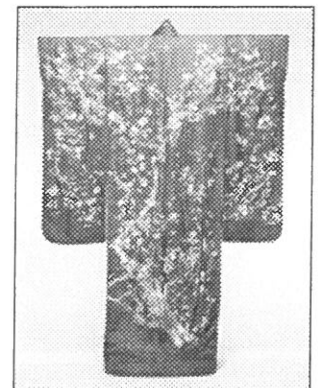


Figure 17
Furisode
Japan; Late Edo period, 19th century; Gift of Gaylord Donnelly in memory of Frances Gaylord Smith; 1991.637

Delicate pairs of gold and green *aoi* (wild ginger) leaves flutter down over vibrant crimson clouds against a blue sky. Golden threads meticulously outline these cloud forms. A pattern of bamboo is subtly woven into a monochromatic field. In the process of creating a robe, the patron, sometimes consulting a pattern book, would confer with the silk merchant to choose a design. Once the bamboo patterned white silk was decided upon, the fabric was cut and basted together to give the shape of the robe. The pieces were then disassembled and given to the dyer. Dyers used the resist-dyeing technique: in order to preserve areas of the white silk from the red dye, the dyer tied those areas off covering them with bamboo husks. Thereafter the blue field was dyed, tying off and covering the newly colored red areas. Finally, the dyed silk was given to the embroiderers. The scattered green leaves were embroidered in relief with colored silk thread. The golden cloud outlines and pairs of gold leaves were embroidered with silk thread wrapped in paper-thin strips of gold-leaf. The golden cloud "outlines" cover white lines left in between the red and blue dyed fields (the result of tying-off during the dyeing process). Finally, the fabric was reassembled and sewn to complete this stunning *furisode*.

Figure 18
Furisode
Japan; Late Edo period, 19th - century; Gift of Gaylord Donnelly in memory of Frances Gaylord Smith; 1991.636

This abbreviated description gives some idea of how labor-intensive and expensive high quality kimono production could be and still is.

Other robes in the Art Institute's collection are decorated with squares of expensive gold and silver leaf (see **Slide 2**)[15] and *shibori* (see **Slide 9**), providing a wealth of examples of the variety of techniques used to make these exquisite garments.

Figure 19
after *Dance of the Stars and Stripes*
from the series *Biography of Mr. Grant: Japanese Documents*; Utagawa Kunisada III
Japan; Meiji period, dated July 1879; Woodblock printed frontispiece

Meiji period (1868 - 1912)

The Meiji period (1868 - 1912) saw the upheaval of the entire feudal system so carefully put into place by the Tokugawa shogunate in the seventeenth century. After almost two hundred and sixty years of virtual isolation from the West,[16] Japan was forcibly opened by the American Commodore Matthew Perry (1853) and his "Black Ships" (so called because the Japanese had never before seen steam ships belching black smoke). Japan then embarked upon a frenzied period of Westernization during which the last Tokugawa shogun was deposed and the emperor "restored" to his traditional ritual role of importance. The accompanying societal upheaval resulted in some rather unfortunate fashion anomalies (**Figs. 19** and **20**). Still the kimono prevailed.

Figure 20
after *Woman in Western Dress*
from the series *Thirty-two Aspects of Customs and Manners;* Tsukioka Yoshitoshi
Japan; Meiji period, dated 1888; Woodblock print

One late Edo-early Meiji *Uchikake* (**Fig. 21** and **Slide 5**) in the Art Institute's collection shows a relatively recent example which nonetheless exhibits a striking continuity with the classical poetic textile tradition. This robe (which was designed to be worn open on top of another sashed *kosode*) is decorated with small, delicately embroidered natural and man-made motifs. Stylized clouds, lyrical landscapes, irises,[17] other assorted seasonal flowers and grasses, butterflies, screens of state (**Fig. 22**), small paintings, and musical instruments, all sewn in jeweled tones, dot the iridescent sky-blue silk. Three small orchid-shaped *kamon*, or family crests are visible (one at the top of each sleeve and the third in the center of the *uchikake*, near the collar). These crest motifs, passed down through generations, are used to decorate clothing, lacquer objects, armor, and other assorted decorative accoutrements.

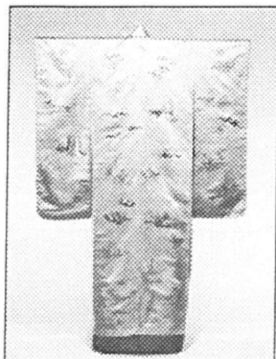


Figure 21
Uchikake
Japan; Late Edo-early Meiji period, 19th-century; Anonymous Gift; 1958.756

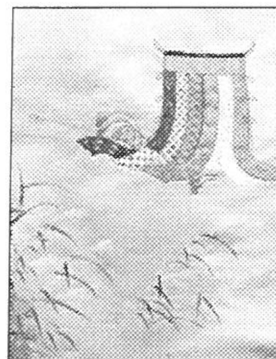


Figure 22
Detail of Figure 21

Taisho (1912 - 1926), Showa (1926 - 1989), and Heisei periods (1989 -)

For the past one hundred years the Japanese have been flirting with Western culture. Due in part to its great expense, the kimono has largely been abandoned in favor of more "practical" Western clothing. The only type of traditional Japanese clothing that is worn widely today is the *yukata*, a type of informal, usually blue and white, thin cotton robe worn indoors in the humid summer months (or year round near Japanese hot springs or after the bath **Fig. 23**). Today, younger Japanese men seldom, if ever, wear formal traditional clothing, except during weddings, which are usually performed part in "traditional" Japanese wedding clothing[18] and part in Western formal wear (**Fig. 24**). Young Japanese women wear kimono only for special occasions, usually traditional festivals and national holidays (**Fig. 25**).

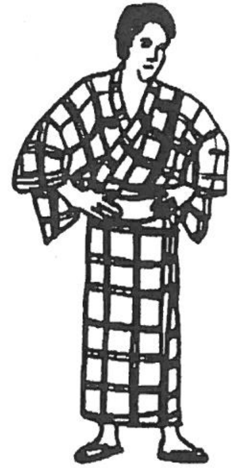


Figure 23
Yukata

Still, the kimono survives. Kimono have even influenced the arts of other cultures (**Fig. 26**). And new, contemporary Japanese kimono designs are still being made, some by artists designated by the Japanese government as National Living Treasures (**Fig. 27**). Perhaps the government hopes that the prestige of that title will inspire another generation of artists to continue the age-old tradition of producing these beautiful kimono, which have become emblematic of everything subtle and ingenious about Japanese design.

This essay can only hope to give a taste of the exhilarating variety of kimono types and patterns that have been worn throughout Japanese history. Interested individuals can refer to books listed in the bibliography for better illustrations and further, more in-depth, reading.

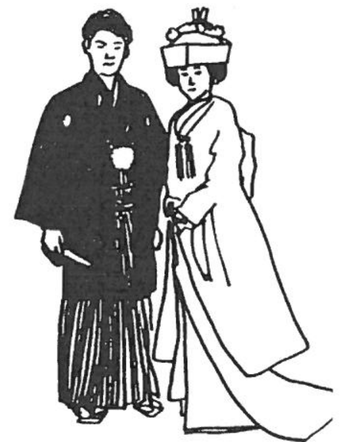


Figure 24
Japanese Wedding Clothing

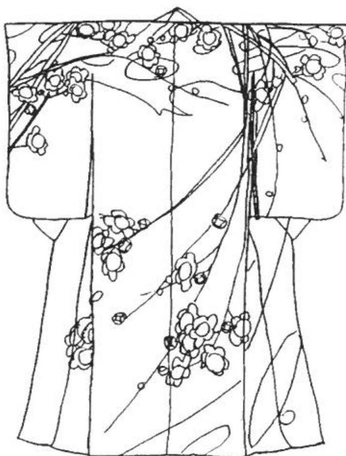


Figure 27
after *Yuzen-dyed Kimono*
designed by Japanese National Living Treasure Kako Moriguchi

Figure 26
after *La Japonaise*
an oil painting by Monet in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 25
Modern Kimono

Endnotes

[1] The Art Institute's collection is documented in *Five Centuries of Japanese Kimono* (listed under The Art Institute of Chicago in the Bibliography), especially in Mary and Ralph Hays' discussion "Noh Costumes and other Japanese Costumes in The Art Institute of Chicago," pp. 20-40.

[2] Ainu textiles are a topic in themselves and will not be dealt with in this Teaching Manual. For information refer to *Designs of Japan: Okinawa, Ainu, and Foreign Designs* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1980).

[3] Think of all the different types of specialized clothing that have developed in our own and many other cultures, e.g. wedding and formal wear; sports, school, and company uniforms; gang colors, etc.

[4] For an 18th-Century, slightly idealized but most accurate version of the silk-making process, see James Ulak's article "Utamaro's Views of Sericulture" in *Five Centuries of Japanese Kimono* (listed under The Art Institute of Chicago in the bibliography), pp. 73-85. (See **Slide 12**)

[5] The silk road is the long and arduous path by which silk-traders travelled from China to the West, extending from Chang'an (one of the two capitals of the Tang dynasty) to Rome.

[6] For information about Todai-ji, see The Art Institute of Chicago, *The Great Eastern Temple: Treasure of Japanese Buddhist Art* from Todai-Ji (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1986), the catalogue of a major exhibition of Todai-ji's artworks held at The Art Institute of Chicago.

[7] *Obi* will not be discussed at any length in this teaching manual. Despite many changes in *obi* style, today's *obi* tend to be made of thick silk, oftentimes brocaded and doubled-over to form a fairly wide, rigid sash.

[8] Dramatic transformations (e.g. from normality to possession) can be indicated by slipping off the sleeves of an outer garment to display the brilliant imagery on a kimono worn underneath (refer to the actor in **Fig. 11**).

[9] From the Heian period novel *Genji Monogatari* by the court Lady Murasaki Shikibu. See Edward Seidenstickers's monumental two volume translation *The Tale of Genji* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976) which is listed in the Bibliography.

[10] This imagery is discussed at length in Monica Bethe's article "The Use of Costumes in Noh Drama" in *Five Centuries of Japanese Kimono* (listed under The Art Institute of Chicago in the Bibliography), pp. 7-19.

[11] After about one century of contact, the Westerners were systematically excluded and all Japanese converts to Christianity persecuted until they publicly renounced their faith (which was seen as a threat to their filial duty as subjects of the shogunate).

[12] From Helen Craig McCullough's translation of *Ise Monogatari*, called *Tales of Ise: Lyrical Episodes* from Tenth Century Japan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), episode 9, pp. 74-75.

[13] **Ka**ragoromo/**Ki**tsutsu narenishi/**Tsu**ma shi areba/**Ha**rubaru kinuru/**Ta**bi o shi zo omou. ("Ha" and "Ba" were not differentiated in classical Japanese).

[14] For an excellent introduction to the concept of pattern books, see Betty Y. Siffert's article "Hinagata Bon: The Art Institute of Chicago Collection of Kimono Pattern Books" in *Five Centuries of Japanese Kimono* (listed under The Art Institute of Chicago in the Bibliography), pp. 86-94.

[15] This robe also recalls the Eight Bridges scene from *Ise Monogatari*, see discussion of **Fig. 13**, above.

[16] Only one port (the tiny island of Dejima near Nagasaki) was open to Westerners (a few Dutch traders), and contact with these foreigners was strictly regulated.

[17] Once again recalling the Eight Bridges story from *Ise Monogatari* (see discussion of the *Momoyama Nuihaku*).

[18] This so-called "traditional" Japanese wedding clothing is something of an anachronism, since it was invented during the Meiji period. The elaborate wedding clothes worn by the Japanese prince and princess during their wedding in 1993 were based on styles of the Heian period.

Chronology

Period	Dates
Jomon period	10,500 - 200 B.C.E.
Yoyoi period	200 B.C.E. - 250 C.E. (from this point all dates are C.E.)
Kofun period	250 - 552 C.E.
Asuka period	538 - 645
Nara period	645 - 794
Heian period	794 - 1185
Kamakura period	1185 - 1333
Muromachi period	1333 - 1573
Momoyama period	1573 - 1615
Edo period	1615 - 1868
Meiji period	1868 - 1912
Taisho period	1912 - 1926
Showa period	1926 - 1989
Heisei period	1989 -

the Japanese Kimono

Produced by Teacher Programs, Department of Museum Education

The Art Institute of Chicago

Authors and Illustrators

Barbara Goldberg

Anne Rose Kitagawa

Designer

Steven Lencioni

Editors

Jane Clarke

Esther Grisham

Consultants

Elinor Pearlstein

Christa C. Mayer Thurman

This teaching manual is supported by
a grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation

© Copyright The Art Institute of Chicago 1994

Cover: *Furisode*, Late Edo period, 19th century, 182.8 x 127.7 cm, Gift of Gaylord Donnelley in memory of Frances Gaylord Smith, 1991.636 (Slide 7)

V. Examine three weave structures:

plain weave, twill weave, and satin weave

When carefully examining the kimono in the slides, one realizes that there are often several design motifs occurring simultaneously. The most obvious pattern is generally the embellishment which is added after the fabric is woven, taking the form of stitching, painting, stenciling, etc. These decorative techniques will be discussed in the following section. Look past these techniques and examine the fabric itself. It is often a complex pattern of interlocking shapes superimposed with flowers. Such patterns are part of the structure of the cloth itself, created as it is woven on the loom. The design is subtle and often monochromatic (one color), the patterning apparent only as light reflects off the surface.

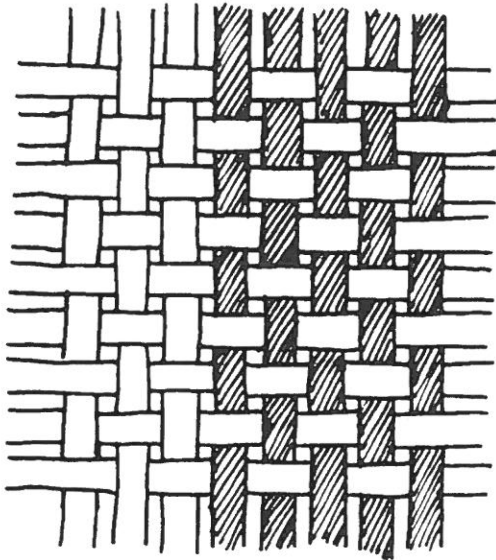
The woven fabrics used for the kimono in the slides are quite complex, yet the students can get some idea of the weaving process by exploring three basic weave structures: plain weave, twill weave, and satin weave. Many different fibers and looms can be used to explore these structures, but to really understand the process, all the students need is paper, pencil, scissors, and a ruler. Refer to the sections *Weave Structure Definitions* and *Weave Structure Diagrams* which follow. Have the students study the diagrams and track one horizontal "weft" and discover how it moves over or under each successive vertical "warp."

1. Most students have made woven mats using paper strips. They have probably used the plain weave without even realizing it. Give each student two sets of 1/2" construction paper strips: one color for the vertical warp (held together along the top with adhesive tape) and another color for the horizontal weft (which the students will weave in row by row in an "over-one, under-one" sequence) — so they can create a PLAIN WEAVE paper fabric.

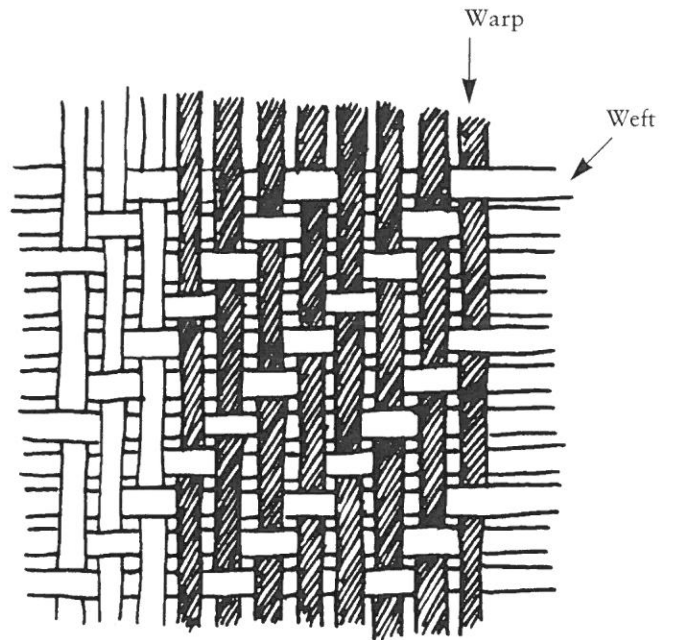
2. If students are familiar with the plain weave, they may proceed to a TWILL WEAVE structure as illustrated in the diagrams which follow. The sequence here is "under three, over one." The trick is to have the "over one" stagger one warp to the right in each successive row. Thus, starting "under three" in the sequence changes with each weft row inserted. Other weave structures such as SATIN WEAVE or SATIN DAMASK WEAVE may be explored, if time and interest permits. Making use of simple paper materials, beautiful woven patterns can be created based on these and other more complex weave structures.

3. Upon completion of one of the above exercises, students can further embellish their "weavings" by painting, drawing, or pasting on top of the woven surface images from nature (plants, insects, birds) or images of objects (fans, bridges, ribbons). Other experiments can include: using the same color for both warp and weft; using various colors for each weft inserted; varying the width of the strips of paper used for the warp or weft; weaving with decorated papers such as wallpaper or wrapping paper. Students may also want to try to create other designs (shapes or pictorial images) by varying the manner in which the weft is inserted. Of course, simple looms and yarn may also be utilized.

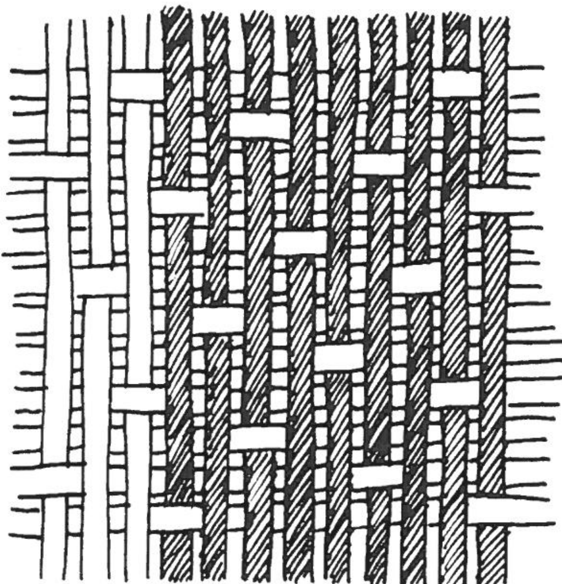
Weave structure diagrams



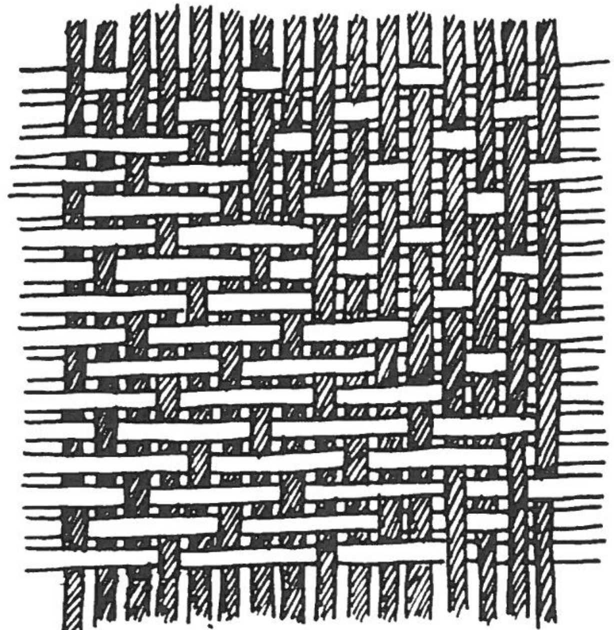
Plain weave



Twill weave
(3/1 warp-float faced twill weave)



Satin weave
(7/1 warp-float faced satin weave)



Satin damask weave
(4/1 satin damask weave)

Weave Structure Definitions

A weaving consists of two sets of interlacing threads. The threads stretched lengthwise and attached to the loom are called WARPS. The crossing threads interwoven with the warps row by row by the weaver are called WEFTS. The way the warps and wefts interlace with each other is known as a WEAVE STRUCTURE. It can be very simple, as in the plain weave, or can be quite involved, with multiple sets of threads interlacing in very complex systems. Some kimono fabrics in the slides make use of additional (or supplementary) sets of warps or wefts, often creating intricate designs which look like needlework. Three basic weave structures will be described below: plain weave, twill weave, and satin weave.

1. plain weave: a textile with a uniform unbroken surface; an even, flat weave with no woven patterning. By varying the spaces between the threads, the fabric can be dense or open; by varying the color of the threads, striped or checkered fabric will result. An example is a cotton button-down shirt.

(1/1: one weft passes over one warp, then under the next warp, repeat)

2. twill weave: a weave where a diagonal is created by each successive row of floats. If the warps and wefts are of the same color, the pattern will be apparent due to the way it reflects light. An example would be denim jeans.

(3/1 warp-faced twill weave is the most common - with one weft passing under three warps, then over one, repeat)

3. satin weave: another kind of float weave where a smoother, more lustrous surface is formed because more floats are created with fewer interruptions. The SATIN DAMASK WEAVE shows a strong self-pattern formed by the contrast of warp and weft-float areas on the same surface. Generally, a satin damask weave is reversible. When a satin weave is used in conjunction with other more complicated weave structures, including additional warps or wefts, the results can be quite lavish. A linen damask tablecloth would be a good example.

(7/1 is common, with one weft passing under seven warps, and over one warp, repeat)

Please note: For additional information regarding weaving, including more technical descriptions and structural variations, many excellent books are available in libraries and bookstores (a few are listed in the bibliography). These descriptions and diagrams are intended to give you and your students a general understanding of several basic weave structures used in the making of textiles.

VI. Explore four decorative techniques used to embellish kimono

Much of the appeal of kimono is due to the techniques used to decorate them. The weave structure is often quite decorative in itself, but what usually catches our eye are the amazing images drawn in vibrantly colored stitches, bright dyes, shimmering gold leaf, and slightly raised circles. The techniques used to create the images are very old, and yet we often see examples of them today on clothing, in home accessories, and in contemporary textile art.

Quite complicated techniques and materials, along with years of experience, are necessary to create what is seen on the kimono in the slides. The kimono are masterpieces of the art and serve to inspire. Students can, however, experience and understand some of the processes with commonly available supplies and simplified techniques. As they try some of the techniques, their enjoyment and appreciation of the kimono designs should increase tremendously. Refer to the sections *Decorative Techniques* and *Needlework Stitch Diagrams* which follow. The designs to be used for the techniques below may be based on those created for other activities in this manual, variations of them, or any other designs you find suitable.

1. Needlework

Materials: silk or cotton floss or thin yarn, fabric or heavy paper, needle, scissors.

Method: Ask your students to study the *Needlework Stitch Diagrams* which follow on page 63 and to practice the basic stitches on a scrap of fabric or paper. When they feel confident, they should decide on a simple design to use and draw it lightly with pencil on the fabric or paper. They can then choose stitches and colors that best suit their image and complete the needlework. Using an embroidery hoop makes stitching on fabric a bit easier, but it is not necessary.

2. Stencil

Materials: stencil paper, very thin cardboard or acetate, paper or fabric, tempera paint or fabric paints, fine sponge or foam rubber.

Method: Students may choose a simple design made up of separate island-like shapes and draw it onto the paper which they will be using as a stencil. The design should be carefully cut-out, using the tip of a sharp scissors (older students can use a mat knife) leaving the background intact. Dipping the sponge into paint (or dye) and first blotting it on scrap paper so paint is not applied too heavily, lay the stencil over the fabric and lightly press the sponge over the cut-out areas of the design. Do not move the stencil until design is filled in with the

paint or the image will blur. Carefully lift the stencil away and the design should be complete. Other stencils and colors can be used after the first design is totally dry.

3. Shibori

Materials: fabric, dye or colored ink or food coloring, thread, needle, rubber bands.

Method: Have students stitch around a simple shape with running stitches and carefully pull it tight, gathering the stitches. Wrap more thread around this gathered puff, and tie the thread off. Dip the fabric into the dye or apply the dye heavily with a thick brush. When dry, take out the stitches and open the fabric to see the design area which had been protected by the stitching. An easier method is more like tie dye where only small areas of fabric are pinched between the fingers and rubber bands are wound tightly around the fabric. Continue the process using the same dye methods as described above.

4. Resist

Materials: stickers, tape, or rubber cement, fabric or paper, fabric paints, watercolors, markers, or crayons.

Method: Your students may create a design on fabric using stickers or tape (on paper, rubber cement can also be used). These act as the "resist," protecting the surface from the paint (or crayon, markers) which are then applied over the entire surface. When the surface dries, carefully remove the stickers and tape (lightly rub the rubber cement off the paper). You can now clearly see the design formed by the resist. Hint — keep the application of the paint fairly light, or it will soak through and seep around the resist from the underside.

Variation: Students can use a white or light color crayon and draw a design on paper. When they are finished, a wash of tempera paint or watercolor (using a dark color) can be brushed over the entire surface. The light crayon will act as the resist and keep the paint from reaching through to the paper. Shapes can also be outlined with crayon, and the interior can be painted, with the crayon line keeping the paint inside the shape (like the "*yuzen*" technique in the paste resist description found in *Decorative Techniques* (page 62).

Please note: As with any complicated technique, you should first experiment before trying it with a class. If your class is really interested in pursuing these techniques, there are many books that go into much greater detail and use more sophisticated methods, some of which are listed in the bibliography. These simple exercises are meant only as an introductory experience.

Decorative Techniques

1. Immersion (Dip) Dyeing: used to dye a full length of cloth or batch of yarns one color.

2. Painting: with dyes or pigments (paints); free-hand or within an outlined pattern and background.

3. Shibori: (tie-dye) a method of resist dyeing, and the name of the fabrics produced by that method. The pattern is reserved by compressing or squeezing the cloth and securing it against dye penetration before dipping the cloth in the dye bath. The resulting pattern is characterized by blurred outlines and a puckered surface. The various methods used are: binding, stitching or folding, and clamping. Often, the small shape to be saved is outlined with a row of tiny stitches which are pulled together tightly and knotted. This part is then tightly wound with thread to protect it from the dye bath, after which all the threads are carefully removed.

4. Applied Metallic Leaf: (surihaku - literally "impressed metallic leaf") a small pattern is cut into a stencil, which is laid on top of the fabric, into which an adhesive is applied. After the stencil is removed, gold or silver leaf is pressed into the glue, with the excess brushed off the surface.

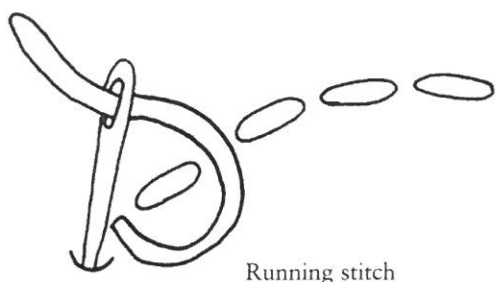
5. Needlework: silk or cotton floss sewn onto the surface of the fabric. Commonly used needlework stitches used on kimono are: stem, satin, long and short, couching, and French (or Chinese) knot.

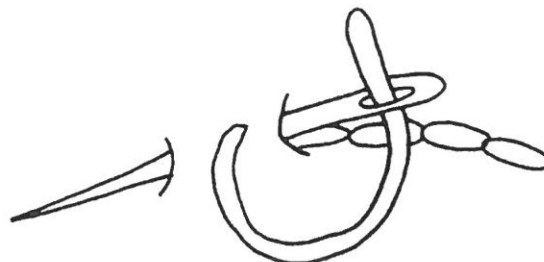
6. Paste Resist: paste is applied to the background of the fabric leaving the pattern areas exposed to the dye bath. The paste protects the fabric from the dye. Also used to outline shapes which are then painted in with dye, thus preventing the dye from spreading beyond the shape and giving it the characteristic fine white outline (*yuzen* technique).

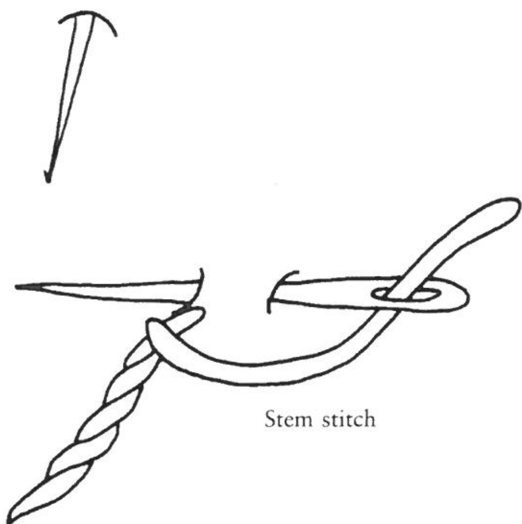
7. Tsujigahana: combination of primarily shibori, with additional free-hand painting, metallic leaf, and sometimes needlework. The designs are usually floral.

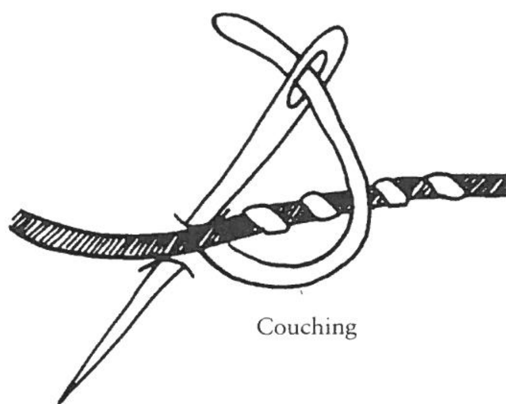
8. Ikat: (yarn resist dyeing) prior to weaving the fabric, this technique involves tying (or wrapping) sections of bundled yarn in a predetermined color pattern. These bundles of yarn are then immersed in a dyebath. The dye penetrates the exposed yarn, while the tied sections remain protected and undyed. There is a characteristic blurred or fuzzy-edged appearance to textiles decorated or treated with ikat. The warps, wefts, or both can be dyed in this way.

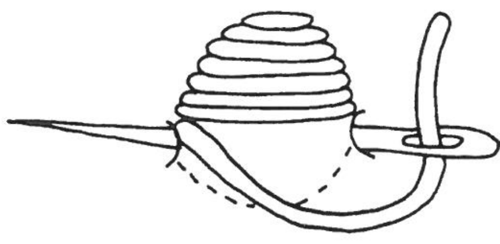
Needlework stitch diagrams

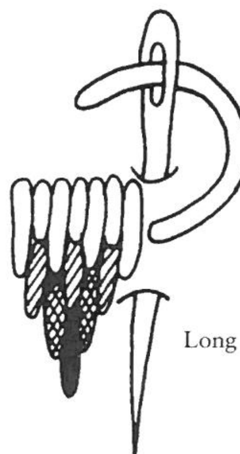

Running stitch

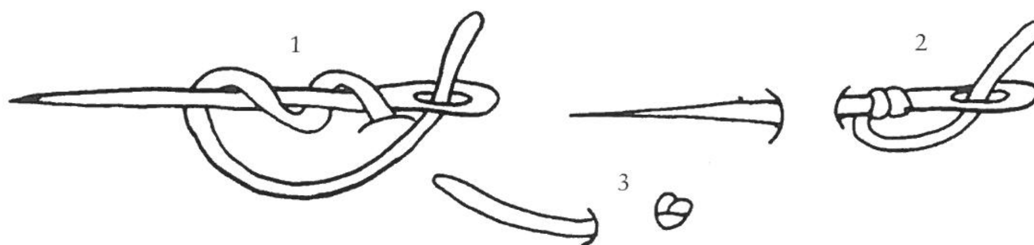

Back stitch


Stem stitch


Couching


Satin stitch


Long and short stitch



French (Chinese) knot

glossary of garment terms

The Japanese Kimono

Garment Terms

aigi: A long *kosode*, usually patterned with shibori, which is worn by women under an *uchikake*.

atsuita: A stiff compound-weave fabric where the motifs are large and bold. Also, the Noh costume made from this fabric and worn for male roles.

atsuita karaori: A *kosode* made of an *atsuita* fabric that has additional patterning which resembles needlework. Used as an under robe for male roles and as an outer robe for female roles in Noh theater.

choken: Literally means "long silk." A loose, unlined cloak often made of gauze weave fabric, with the front and back panels attached at the shoulders only.

furisode: A variation of the *kosode* with long, hanging sleeves; now worn by children and young unmarried women on special holidays.

hangiri: A full trouser with bold patterns and similar to *oguchi*, but the back is stiffened with an inner lining of woven reeds.

haori: An informal 3/4-length outer coat which is worn over the *kosode*.

kamishimo: Literally means "upper and lower." Consists of two garments — jacket and trousers. The "upper" is the *katagitu* (literally means "the silk covering the shoulders") and the "lower" is the *hakama* (the full-cut trousers).

karaori: A compound-weave fabric characterized by long, floating wefts resembling embroidery. Also, the type of Noh costume made of this fabric and worn as an outer robe for females roles.

kimono: Term of ancient origin, meaning literally "the thing worn." Now it refers to the modern descendant of the *kosode*.

kosode: Forerunner of the modern day *kimono* characterized by narrow openings for the hands at the sleeve ends. The word *kosode* (small sleeves) refers to the small wrist opening, not to the width of the sleeve itself. It is also a generic term used in the same way that *kimono* is used today.

nuihaku: A *kosode* patterned with both needlework (*nui*) and impressed metallic leaf (*surihaku*). Used mainly for female roles as inner or outer robe; or inner robe for males.

obi: A sash, used to adjust the length of the *kosode* and to help keep it closed.

oguchi: A skirtlike trouser, plain or patterned, with large pleats in the front and stiff panels in the back.

osodemono: Outer garments which have wide sleeves and a large opening for the arm.

sashinuki: Long pleated trousers which are gathered at the ankles and worn over *oguchi.*

surihaku: Literally "impressed metallic leaf." Metallic (gold or silver) leaf pattern on cloth, often applied by spreading an adhesive through a stencil and pressing the leaf onto the glue. Also, the type of Noh costume made of this kind of fabric and worn for male roles.

uchikake: A formal outer garment which is worn unbelted over the *kosode.*