KIMONO IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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A source of pride as the national costume in Japan, the kimono is a palette for expression by a discerning wearer, and for the observer it can be perceived as an emblem of sophisticated Japanese taste. The form of the kimono has not evolved greatly over the last century, but with changing fashions and adaptation from other forms of graphic or painterly art, kimono textile patterns and color can bring modernity and cutting-edge style to what is otherwise essentially a pre-modern form of dress.

In the early to mid-20th century, kimono textiles displayed a vogue for imported design styles from Europe and the United States. Local designers would adjust modes such as Art Nouveau, Constructivism and Art Deco, then Jazz style in the post-war era, to fit Japanese taste. In the 1920s and 1930s, Japanese textile designers also developed their own fashion for oversized motifs in bright, acid colors, often laid against a geometric or other repeat ground. This was based on new technology that allowed for larger patterns and less costly production. Luxury goods were banned during wartime, but the recovery in the 1950s brought a trend back toward bold motifs, this time on richly-toned grounds, and sometimes with Pop-art or stylishly abstract effects.

Kimono, whose forebear was the kosode (kimono with small sleeve opening) worn by samurai-class women before 1868, were very popular as daily and formal wear for women in the pre-war years of the 20th century. The high cost of kimono caused people to curtail their use, especially during and immediately following the war. Though kimono did make a return in the 1950s and 1960s, they are now purposed almost solely for familial or traditional use and are rarely seen on the street unless the wearer wishes to make a distinct impression. As the wearing of silk kimono has become more limited, conservative motifs predominate, as these are more flexible in their use.

In the present day, kimono are worn at New Year’s Day or on ceremonial days marking life passages—presentation of a newborn to a Shinto shrine, graduation, marriage, retirement or a funeral. One sees the hōmongi (kimono for visiting) at such events, and a hōmongi or a slightly less formal komon (kimono with small overall patterns) worn to artistic events such as a meeting for tea, a display of flower arranging or a musical or theatrical performance of native style. Komon, yukata (summer kimono) and kimono of ramie or wool can be worn as street wear or to religious celebrations or festivals. The more formal tomesode decorated with family crests are reserved for the wedding of an immediate family member.

There are complex rules to the wearing of kimono. Kimono of various sleeve lengths and palettes are appropriate for wear based on the woman’s age, the season, the formality level and the purpose of the event to be celebrated. Kosode with shorter sleeves are worn by women past marriage age, with furisode (swinging sleeves) donned by girls and young women. Teenaged girls are also encouraged to wear bold patterns in bright, contrasting hues, while a more mature woman chooses increasingly subtle tones with lower levels of contrast and more demure, smaller motifs as she ages. If a young woman prefers darker colors, she can make her ensemble appear youthful with a bright obi (sash) along with lighter scarves and zori (thong sandals), and if an older woman likes cheerful tones, she can wear a colorful kimono tempered with darker accessories. A girl also has many options for tying the obi into decorative shapes, while an older woman mostly chooses the taiko (or squared, box-like) tie. Dressing entirely against one’s age is deemed highly inappropriate.

Unlike the single layered and informal yukata, the kimono is the most obvious layer in an outfit often comprised of an underkimono (jūban) having a detachable collar (han eri), various ties and pads to hold the outer kimono at the proper length and in an overall tubular form, a sash (obi) with an enwrapping cord (obi jime), and a complementary scarf (obi age) tucked in the top of the obi. The latter is exposed to a greater or lesser extent dependent upon the wearer’s age. Further accessorizing these layers, one may see a brooch-like pin (obi dome) used to close the kimono at top or on the obi jime instead of a tie, split-toed socks (tabi), and in the case of formal kimono, leather or cloth-covered zori. In cooler weather, a jacket (haori) is added, which complements the entire set.

Assembling the modern kimono is a science and art. Actually putting on the kimono properly, with the collar pulled back to create a graceful line, the excess length of kimono fabric folded and tied under the obi so the skirt hits above the toes, the shaping of the V-neck to suit one’s age, and the demanding exercise of wrapping and tying an obi, all have to be learned and practiced. In addition, guidelines apply to sleeve length, use of family crests, scale of motifs and their usage by season, ground color and proper color combinations, as well as tonal contrast levels.
Seasonal references in kimono are both creative and challenging because the motifs on kimono anticipate rather than directly reflect the present season. For instance, although cherry trees blossom in early April in Japan, March would be the time to display them on kimono. Additionally, the obi and accessories are not chosen to match but to complement the kimono, frequently through use of contrasting fabric type, colors and textures, as well as proper interrelation of motifs. True mastery and cognizance of kimono wearing engenders high respect.

With the dramatic cost of the kimono ensemble and its specialized use, women often choose a multi-season kimono, making it appropriate to time of year, their age, and the specific occasion with accessories. Kimono in this exhibition date mostly to the latter half of the 20th century, and represent both formal and street wear. Their modes and motifs reflect how textile designers responded to the evolution of graphic design in both international and local fashion and applied these new approaches to the classic kimono form.

This exhibition is guest-curated by Hollis Goodall and generously supported by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission and Sid and Betsey Tyler.


[cover] Fukuro-type Obi (Detail), Japan, 1960s-70s, Gift of Ms. Tomiko A. Hill, 1996.52.5