

# Kimono

In its broadest sense, the Japanese word 'kimono' means 'clothing', and it is usually applied to the traditional and specific garment which is the national dress of Japan, shaped like a T, with rectangular sleeves, which is wrapped around the body. The kimono, worn by men and women alike, is made of vertical strips of cloth sewn together and held in place by a sash (*obi*) fastened around the hips. The term 'kimono' is used essentially to differentiate the traditional Japanese robe from western-style clothing (*yofuku*) and does not include the short jacket (*haori*) worn over the kimono and the undergarments (*juban*). The kimono is derived from the *kosode* (literally 'small sleeves' because the sleeve opening was stitched up to leave space enough only for the insertion of a hand). The *kosode* was worn by the aristocracy beneath one or several mantles as of the Nara period (710-784). At some time, during the 16th century, the lower classes began to wear it as their standard outer garment. It is probable that the samurai took to wearing the kimono on informal occasions because it was comfortable, thus adopting a garment which was standard garb for the lower classes. However, the *kosode* worn in the various strata of society differed. The upper classes preferred the *kosode* with woven or embroidered patterns, preferably imported from China. It was considered more elegant than the dyed garments worn by the simple people, decorated by means of textile printing (*katazome*) or tie-dying (*shibori*). Since the 16th century the basic shape of the *kosode* has hardly changed, apart from its length or styles of decoration. The general term kimono to include the *kosode* only came into use in the 18th century.

The number of wealthy merchants from the lower classes increased in the big cities of the Edo era (1600-1868), contributing to the proliferation of artists designing, embellishing and selling the kimono. The women of the pleasure quarters and the Kabuki actors served as sources for copying and developing new styles. The artists made brush drawings or embroidered the silken garments as if they were painters' canvases, contributing to the development of the pure Japanese taste. Inspiration for decorating the kimono has always been nature and the changing seasons. Pale pink still symbolizes the flowering cherry, light greens and blues are evocative of spring, maple leaves and a broad spectrum of strong reds and browns represent autumn, cranes and tortoises symbolize good luck in marriage, the pine tree indicates a new year and so on. In the 17th century a new method of painting and dying was developed, in which sections of the cloth were blocked out with a paste made from rice starch or soya bean that defined borders and prevented colours from spreading. The narrow girdle which had secured the women's kimono was exchanged for a broader, more rigid sash, wound round the body and fastened below the bosom. In the 18th century, artists also began to focus on designs for this sash. The kimono and the sash became so elegant and costly that only the richest merchants and feudal nobility were able to afford them. Indeed the price of a kimono was so astronomical that in 1683, 1689, and again in 1721 the government imposed prohibitions on such excesses and on the shining, silk kimonos of the men. Only the aristocracy was permitted to wear them. Ordinary folk had to be content with kimonos made of raffia, linen or cotton. The wealthier townspeople evaded the edict by wearing kimonos which looked plain, but whose inner lining was made of fine, decorated silk. But the law was never rigorously enforced, and by the beginning of the 19th century the silk kimono was the accepted garb of the wealthy. In the Meiji era (1868-1912), many men began wearing western-style clothing and the kimono was only worn for official events or relaxation at home. As of 1870, government officials were ordered to wear suits. Similar laws were passed concerning garments to be worn at court, for men in 1872 and for women in 1886. But only at the beginning of the Showa era (1926-1989) did western dress become popular with women and today most women only wear the kimono for ceremonial events or when engaged in traditional matters. Children and adults usually wear kimonos at the New Year, for children's birthday celebrations at the ages of three, five, or seven (*shichigosan*), on Graduation Day (*gempuku*) when they finish their studies, or for their wedding. Until the end of the Second World War most Japanese women wore the kimono. Today, however, they are only worn for special occasions. The formal kimono of the men is made of black silk (*habutae*) on which the only decoration is the family crest, printed in white on the back, on each side of the front,

and on the sleeves. This kimono, like any other garment bearing the family crest, is called *montsuki*. Above it, the man wears a short jacket (*haori*) and a pleated trouser-skirt (*hakama*). On less formal occasions, men wear woolen kimonos and jackets. The summer kimonos (*yukata*) are made of light cotton, and at home men wear cotton shorts and an outer robe (*jimbei*). In winter, a padded cotton cloak (*tanzen*), usually striped, is worn at home over the kimono. Women's kimonos are adapted to their status, their age and the season. There are specific styles for weddings, celebrations and mourning. The lovely wedding costume consists of a long outer robe (*uchikake*), usually red or white, which is not fastened with a sash. It is sometimes embroidered with coloured good luck symbols such as the crane or the tortoise. Beneath this, the bride wears two white undergarments (*kakeshita*). She wears a hat (*tsuno kakushi*: 'covering the horns'). The festive kimono is made of black silk (*chirimen*) and is called *edozuma* or *tomesode*. It has the family crest and designs on the front and the hem. Unmarried women wear a kimono with sleeves which can be up to one metre long (*furisode*), and is usually covered with a diagonal pattern extending from shoulder to hem. The sash is folded in two (*maruobi*). At funerals, women wear a black kimono with the family crest over a white gown. The sash and other accessories are also black. The kimono can be either unpadded (*hitoe*) or padded (*awase*). The unpadded kimono is worn from June to September. Ordinarily, a light cotton robe (*yukata*) printed with a stencil design is worn. In the street or on formal occasions, they wear a kimono of silk or fine linen (*jofu*). The padded kimono worn from October to May is usually made of silk and wool. Today, synthetic fibers are also used for both types of kimono and woolen ones are usually worn in winter. The quilted cotton kimono, also intended for winter, is only worn at home.

Putting on a kimono is quite complicated. A woman, for instance, dresses in the following order: *tabi* (white socks with the big toe separated from the other toes) and wooden clogs (*zōri*); a petticoat below an underskirt; an under kimono (*nagajuban*) fastened tightly with a wide belt (*datemaki*). This robe has a high white collar (*han'eri*) usually extending about 2 cm. beyond the collar of the outer kimono. The latter is fitted to the body, and all the seams are straight. Length is adjusted by folding the extra fabric around the hips. The kimono is usually 20 centimeters longer than the woman's body, and when she puts it on, the extra fabric (*ohashori*) is tucked under the sash so that a fold 4-5 cm. wide shows beneath the knot of the sash. Part of the sleeve seam beneath the armpit is left open. The man's kimono is also longer than the body of its wearer, but the extra fabric is folded and stitched in place round the hips, invisible under the sash. The sleeve seam is completely closed. The children's kimonos have the extra cloth tucked and stitched in place at the shoulder and the hip, so that they can be lengthened as the child grows. In the front of the kimono, the left side overlaps the right side, (except when dressing a corpse for burial, when the opposite applies) and is secured with a belt. The outer sash is then fastened at the back. Accessories worn with the kimono include the fan, and a little purse with a drawstring opening. Putting on the kimono and tying the sash are conventions handed down from mother to daughter, but since fewer women are wearing them today, there are special schools for learning the traditional techniques. Unlike the ever-changing fashions of the West, the kimono has hardly changed in shape or decoration since the 19th century. Women can thus continue to wear kimonos which belonged to their mothers or grandmothers without feeling unfashionable.

Most modern Japanese do not wear the kimono, but it is still considered a work of art. Even though textiles are now manufactured industrially, the artists of Japan continue the tradition of making the garments from natural fibers and embellishing them with natural dyes. Contemporary kimono artists continue to create new variations of traditional motifs, thereby safeguarding the soul of Japan.

The exhibition features Japanese kimonos from the collection of Sandy and Kenneth Bleifer of California, donated to the museum this year, and from the Museum's collection.