Cranes, Dragons, and Teddy Bears
Japanese Children’s Kimono from the Collection of Marita and David Paly

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PORTLAND ART MUSEUM, OREGON
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Throughout history and across the globe, children’s clothing has consisted of smaller versions of adult garments. In Japan, from the tenth century until modern times, kimono were worn by men and women of all ages and all social stations. Children regularly wore hand-me-downs from their elders, of course, but families who could afford to do so would clothe their youngest in kimono specifically fashioned for small bodies, often adorned with auspicious motifs: to wear cranes, dragons, or other emblems of immortality was to be literally wrapped in good wishes for health and long life.

Most of the kimono in this exhibition feature pictorial designs created through the use of kasuri or tsutsugaki, resist-dyeing techniques that were developed to very high levels of craftsmanship in Japan by the eighteenth century. Ceremonial occasions called for more extravagant measures: eight garments in this group are miyamairi kimono, one-of-a-kind ceremonial wear made for a toddler’s first visit to a Shinto shrine. These mimic the shape of formal adult kimono and feature family crests and pictorial designs created through a combination of tsutsugaki and hand-painting, or hand-painting alone.

Of special interest are the three boys’ kimono with omoshirogara, “novelty designs” that came into vogue in the 1910s through 1930s. Dating from an era when Japan was rapidly modernizing, these robes are decorated with machine-printed images of modernity, such as airplanes and teddy bears.

Spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the kimono and banners in this exhibition evoke the magic of childhood in traditional Japan. The Museum is grateful to Marita and David Paly for so generously sharing their collection. David Paly was also an inexhaustible source of information about Japanese textiles and dyeing techniques.

Kimono Construction

The basic form of the Japanese kimono has changed little over time. Practical and versatile, it is a garment that celebrates the inherent beauty of cloth, uninterrupted by tailoring. An adult kimono is made from a single bolt of fabric, about 14 inches wide and 38 feet long, which is cut into seven straight pieces. Two long panels form the right and left half of the garment, each in a long strip of cloth that is draped over the shoulder. Two shorter panels form the sleeves, two more become the overlapping sections in the front of the garment, and a narrow strip forms the lapel and collar. Vertical seams are uncut, and the selvage edges are basted together with a long running stitch.
The inevitable consequence of this system is that all adult kimono are the same width—about 26 inches. Differences in height are accommodated by folds tucked under the obi (sash), making it possible to shorten the garment by several inches. Differences in girth are usually ignored, although for a thin person the side seams can be taken in, but never trimmed. The kimono was never intended to be a close-fitting garment that revealed the contours of the body.

For children, however, various solutions must be found to make a garment of appropriate size. Kimono for toddlers sometimes use a single panel of cloth at the back or, when two panels are used, tucks might be taken at the yoke to make the shoulders narrower. If it is necessary to shorten the garment, a deep fold is sewn in at the waistline.

Fibers

Japanese clothing was historically made from three main fibers: asa, silk, and cotton. Asa is the generic Japanese term for bast fibers—fibers extracted from the inner bark of a wide family of trees, shrubs, and grasses, such as hemp, ramie, mulberry, and wisteria. Like linen, which was unknown in Japan, asa is slightly stiff and coarse. Asa has been in use since prehistoric times for making cloth, as it was the most readily available raw material. The highest quality asa is referred to as jōfu, “superior cloth,” a plain-weave fabric woven from thin, very fine bast fibers—usually from the ramie plant. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several regions of Japan developed their own distinctive jōfu as luxury cloth for presentation to the domain lord or the shogun. Silk was introduced to Japan from China, along with other technologies of continental culture, sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries. Spun from the cocoons of silkworms that feed on mulberry leaves, silk contains animal protein, which makes it vulnerable to damage from overexposure to sunlight. Otherwise silk threads are surprisingly strong and versatile. Silk takes dyes well and is comfortable against the skin, cool in summer, and warm in winter. For most of history, its high cost restricted its use to members of the court nobility or samurai warlords. During the Edo period (1615–1868), commoners were forbidden by law from wearing silk: it was thought that self-indulgence in luxury fabrics would undermine their morals!
Cotton has a relatively short history in Japan. Native to tropical and semi-tropical climates such as India and Egypt, it first appeared in Japan during the fifteenth century, but it did not become widely available until the mid-eighteenth century. Indigo had been known in ancient times, but came into large-scale production with the rise of cotton. Indigo as a dye is unique in that it strengthens fibers; it also contains a natural insecticide, so indigo-dyed cotton trousers and jackets were eagerly adopted by farmers throughout the country. City dwellers took to indigo-dyed cotton kimono as a less expensive, warmer, and more comfortable alternative to asa garments.

**Dyeing Techniques**

*Kasuri*, from the verb *kasumu*, to grow hazy or blurry, is the Japanese term for a resist-dyeing technique that was introduced from Indonesia, where it is known as ikat. (Okinawa was likely an intermediary in this cultural transfer.) In this plain-weave cloth, patterns are created by binding and dyeing the yarns before they are strung on the loom. Variants include resist-dyeing only the warp yarns, only the weft yarns, and double ikat, where both horizontal and vertical threads are resist-dyed. Japanese dyers excelled at creating pictorial designs (*e-gasu*), which were popular for both adult and children’s kimono.

*Tsutsugaki*, literally “pipe drawing,” is a resist-dyeing technique that offers far greater freedom than *kasuri*. Fabric is stretched on a frame, and the dyer draws designs freehand with a rice paste extruded from a conical tube (*tsutsu*). When the cloth is dipped into dye, the areas coated with paste are not affected. The process is repeated for every color used in the garment.

This exhibition was organized by the Portland Art Museum and curated by Maribeth Graybill, Ph.D., the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Asian Art.

**GLOSSARY**

*Akane*: The Japanese word for madder, a herbaceous perennial plant. The roots are the source of a range of red pigments that have been used since prehistoric times to create vibrant, fast red dyes for cloth.

*Asa*: The generic Japanese word for bast fibers, such as ramie and hemp.

*Beni*: A red dye and pigment derived from *benibana*, the safflower plant; used in Japan from the late seventh or eighth century onward.

*Boro*: Patchwork or rags; from *boroboro*, “in tatters.”

*Jōfu*: “Superior cloth”, plain-weave fabric woven from thin, very fine bast fibers—usually from the ramie plant.

*Kasuri*: The Japanese term for ikat.

*Ikat*: The Indonesian term, now widely accepted in English-language scholarship, for plain-weave cloth with patterns created by resist-dyeing the yarns before they are strung on the loom.

*Minogame*: Tortoises wearing a straw raincoat (*mino*). In East Asian lore, tortoises are symbols of longevity. The minogame is a Japanese variant on this theme, in which the tortoise is so ancient that it has acquired a long cape or train of seaweed on its back.

*Miyamairi*: “Shrine pilgrimage”; in this context, an infant’s first visit to a Shinto shrine, where the parents will celebrate the birth and offer prayers for the child’s health and long life. Historically, this ritual took place between the 30th and 100th day after birth, but there were many regional differences in practice.

*Omoshirogara*: Novelty designs, referring to pictorial designs that became popular in Japan in the 1910s through 1930s.

*Semamori*: “Protection for the back”; a talismanic motif, usually in red, added at the back of the neck of a child’s kimono.

*Shijira-ori*: A special type of silk weave created by applying different tension to the warp and weft yarns, creating a puckered effect.

*Shikon*: Also known as *murasaki*; purple gromwell, a plant that has been cultivated in Japan since the eighth century as a dye and medicine.

*Shōja*: A mythological sprite with a red face and hair, and a tendency to overindulge in alcohol.

**Recommended Reading**


Kimono with Kasuri Designs

1. Shijira-ori Boy’s Kimono with Field Block Design and Kasuri Crosses
   Late 18th/early 19th century
   Silk with double ikat designs in beni, indigo, and indigo-on-yellow; unlined
   25 x 25 inches

2. Padded Girl’s Kimono with Kasuri Plaid Design
   19th century
   Silk with single and double ikat designs in indigo and shikon; black silk lining
   29 1/2 x 30 inches

3. Boro Infant’s Kimono
   19th century
   Patchwork cotton with stripes and double ikat patterns in indigo and shikon; red cotton collar
   24 x 24 inches

4. Miyamairi Girl’s Kimono with Kasuri Paulownia Leaves and Stylized Phoenixes
   19th century
   Silk with single and double ikat designs in indigo and light gray; red silk thread embroidery
   semamori at neck; sleeves lined with red crepe silk
   37 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches

5. Boy’s Kimono with Kasuri Dragons
   Probably Ômi province (present-day Shiga Prefecture)
   Jōfu (ramie) with ikat designs in indigo; unlined
   37 x 24 inches

6. Boy’s Kimono with Kasuri Arrowheads
   Amami Ōshima, Kagoshima Prefecture
   19th century
   Silk with double ikat designs in indigo and iron mud dye; indigo cotton lining
   30 x 34 inches

7. Boy’s Kimono with Kasuri Carp and Nets
   Late 19th/early 20th century
   Asa with double ikat designs in indigo; beni asa lining at the yoke and lower back; sleeve ends trimmed with printed cotton piping
   43 x 45 inches

8. Girl’s Kimono with Kasuri Tea Bowls, Vases, Chrysanthemums, and Bamboo
   Probably Echigo region (present-day Niigata Prefecture)
   First quarter of 20th century
   Jōfu with double ikat designs in indigo; appliquéd semamori patch at neck of resist- and tie-dyed crepe silk; unlined
   35 1/2 x 29 inches

9. Girl’s Kimono with Kasuri Stripes and Squared Spirals
   Kurume, Fukuoka Prefecture
   First half of 20th century
   Cotton with single and double ikat designs in indigo; unlined
   33 x 31 3/4 inches

10. Padded Miyamairi Kimono with Family Crests and Longevity Motifs: Crane, Minogame Tortoises, Pines, Rocks, and Bamboo
    Tōhoku region (northern Japan)
    19th century
    Cotton with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in gray and black; cumin ground; akane (madder) cotton lining
    39 3/4 x 35 1/4 inches

11. Padded Miyamairi Boy’s Kimono with Family Crests and Auspicious Motifs: Eagles, Pines, Peonies, Hat and Cape of Invisibility, Mallet, Treasure Bag, and Scroll
    Probably Tōhoku region (northern Japan)
    19th century
    Cotton with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in red, yellow, gray, and black; indigo ground; indigo cotton lining
    41 x 39 1/2 inches

12. Miyamairi Girl’s Kimono with Family Crests and Auspicious Motifs: Mallets, Cloves, Hat and Cape of Invisibility, Key, Treasure Bags, and More
    19th century
    Asa with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in beni, yellow, brown, and black; indigo ground; red silk lining at edges of sleeves
    40 x 38 inches

13. Miyamairi Kimono with Family Crests and Design of Rabbits and Waves
    19th century
    Cotton with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in indigo and black; indigo-over-yellow ground; unlined
    32 x 28 inches

14. Miyamairi Boy’s Kimono with Family Crests and Design of Birds of Prey and Waves
    19th century
    Asa with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in indigo and black; pale yellow ground; unlined
    38 1/4 x 43 inches

15. Boy’s Kimono with Family Crests and Scene of the Warrior Nitta Yoshisada Throwing His Sword into the Sea, after a design by Utagawa Kuniyoshi
    Mid-19th century
    Cotton with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in indigo, beni, yellow, green, and black; persimmon ground; blue silk lining with hand-painted design of deer among grasses
    43 x 39 1/2 inches

15a. Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861)
    Nitta Yoshisada Throwing His Sword into the Sea, 1844
    Published by Ezakiya Tatsuzō
    Color woodblock print triptych
    13 3/4 x 28 3/4 inches

16. Miyamairi Boy’s Kimono with Family Crests and Design of Sea Bream and Waves
    19th century
    Asa with tsutsugaki and hand-painted designs in indigo and black; deep yellow ground; unlined
    36 x 37 inches
17. *Miyamairi* Girl’s Kimono with Family Crests and Landscape of Itsukushima Shrine
   19th century
   Aso with hand-painted designs in indigo, light brown, and black; pale yellow ground; sleeves lined with crepe silk
   39 x 32 inches

19th century

**Omoshirogara Kimono**

18. Boy’s Padded Kimono with Design of Snowmen, Penguins, Sailors, and Japanese Flag
   1910s
   Cotton with machine-printed kasuri designs; green cotton lining
   33 x 30 inches

19. Boy’s Kimono with Design of Trucks, Motorcycles, and Racing Cars
   1920s/30s
   Cotton with machine-printed kasuri designs; indigo cotton lining
   29 x 28 ½ inches

20. Boy’s Kimono with Design of Teddy Bears, Ships, Planes, and Tanks
   1930s
   Rayon with machine-printed designs; white rayon lining
   30 x 32 inches

   19th/early 20th century
   Asa with tsutsugaki designs in indigo and beni
   37 ½ x 25 ½ inches

22. Boy’s Day Banner with Family Crest and Design of Rabbits and Waves
   19th century
   Cotton with tsutsugaki designs in indigo, beni, and black
   225 x 24 ½ inches

23. Boy’s Day Banner with Family Crest and Design of the Sprite Shōjō Dancing on a Jar of Saké
   19th century
   Cotton with tsutsugaki designs in indigo, beni, brown, and black
   80 ½ x 13 inches

24. Boy’s Day Banner in the Shape of a Carp
   Second half of 19th century
   Aso with tsutsugaki designs in indigo, beni, and yellow
   112 x 25 ¾ inches

**Boy’s Day Banners**

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