

KIMONO The Global Adventures of a Fashion Icon

By Gavin James Campbell



The kimono has long circulated outside Japan. Here a poster from the Parisian couturier house Babani shows the influence of the kimono on Parisian fashion in the 1910s and 1920s. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](https://tinyurl.com/33n7emka) at <https://tinyurl.com/33n7emka>.

Clothing is a fun and accessible way to show students global connections. Tracing the odyssey by which a “simple” t-shirt was conceived, resourced, designed, woven, sewn, marketed and delivered reveals the far-reaching networks that keep us clothed. Fast fashion and modern technology has considerably sped up this process, but the global fashion industry is ancient. Most of humanity’s earliest overland and maritime trade routes were an attempt to get beautiful cloth and dyestuffs from one remote place to another. That means that as far back as we can go, human dress has always been a global collaboration.

But even if *clothing* is universal, many students will assume that *fashion* is something the West invented. After all, fashion needs rapid and constant change, huge capital investment, and global networks of trade, inspiration and technology. The kimono and other supposedly timeless “native costumes” the world over suggest something completely opposite: societies suspicious of change and innovation. Yet a quick survey of the kimono from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries reveals just how deeply Japanese dress intersected with the rest of the world. The kimono therefore challenges Asia’s exclusion from the development of global fashion, and also suggests how clothing can stitch Japan into global history.

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The Japanese have always loved good style, and during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), dressing well required something more exciting than what could be found rummaging through neighborhood shops. So even after the Tokugawa shōgunate scaled back international commerce in the 1630s and “closed” the country to indiscriminate trade, the Japanese still pillaged the closets and workshops of Europe, Asia and the “New World.” Clothing was so important to Japanese trade that 1660 shōgunal regulations capped the number of Chinese vessels arriving into Nagasaki while simultaneously requiring that silk yarn and cloth make up two-thirds of the cargo. And though the number of Japan’s global trading partners shrank, ships allowed in had scoured nearly every ocean on behalf of Japanese fashion. Chinese captains, for instance, brought in textiles and dyes from Cambodia, Patani, Tonkin, and the Malay Peninsula, while Dutch East India

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Company ships swelled the fashion flotilla with fabrics from all over its own far-reaching empire. In 1636, for instance, ten heavily-laden Dutch ships arrived, and not one had sailed directly from Amsterdam. Five came from Taiwan, three from Batavia (Jakarta) and two from Acheh (Sumatra). In the coming years they would add stopovers in Bengal, Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast of the Indian Subcontinent. [Figure 1] Smugglers piled on even more to the horde. An astonished Dutch trader wrote that “all sorts of stuffs and cloth yield a considerable and sure profit.” No matter how much was brought in, he marveled, “the consumption in so populous a country would be still greater.”¹

To be clear, Tokugawa fashion was not a free-for-all. After all, the shōgunal government and the feudal lords (*daimyo*) maintained sumptuary regulations they deemed necessary to preserve social hierarchies. People in power should dress like people in power; those at the bottom should look the part. Enforcing these restrictions, however, resulted in an endless game of fashion whack-a-mole. If rules decreed that some people couldn't wear silk, then inevitably humble cotton was used to imitate the latest trends. Fashion, moreover, was largely an urban game. The great majority of Japanese lived in the countryside as agricultural laborers and had neither the money nor the occasion to dress in the outrageous garments seen in Osaka,

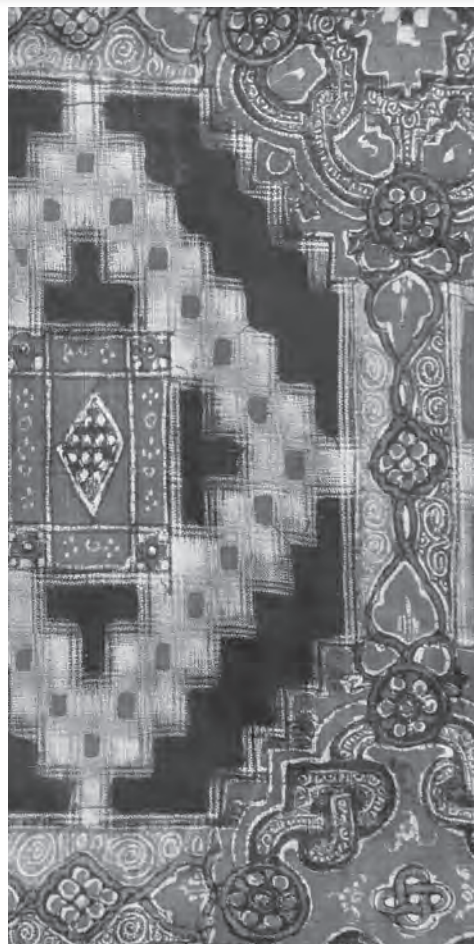


Figure 1: A textile from India's Coromandel Coast, traded to Japan in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The Japanese called these kinds of textiles *sarasa*, and their designs and colors were widely admired and imitated by Japanese makers.

Kyoto and Edo (contemporary Tokyo). Yet even if they didn't partake, those in the countryside could still participate vicariously. Much of the fashion world depended on the creativity of rural weavers who sold their work to the great cities, while kimono design books and popular woodblock prints also circulated widely, showing just how leading actors and courtesans were pushing the boundaries of taste. So, while wearing garments that raised hackles and stoked envy may have been the privilege of a few, taking an interest in the latest styles was a widespread pleasure.

Perhaps most striking of all, this parade of Tokugawa fashion depended on the inspiration and the contributions of merchants and craftspeople from all across Japan and the globe. Well dressed men and women of the realm strutted about in British wool, Indian cotton, Portuguese velvet and Javanese batik. They flashed silks from China, Korea, the Malay Peninsula and Persia, and they colored their clothes with dyestuffs from Siam, New Spain (Mexico) and Prussia. Even garments made wholly in Japan reproduced the captivating designs found on imported Indian and Indonesian textiles. So successful were these imitations that many came to think of them as native techniques and designs. Shōgunal officials spent centuries grumbling about exchanging “our valuable articles like gold, silver, copper, and iron for useless foreign goods like woolens and satin,” but that did not slow down demand or turn the country inward.² Long before Perry's “black ships” arrived in the 1850s to open commerce, the kimono had helped put Japan into a broader trading network built around global fashion.

Japan's remarkable modernization in the late nineteenth century only accelerated these earlier interconnections. While many in the aristocracy gravitated towards Western tailored clothing, the vast majority of Japanese stayed in kimono. But that was not because of poverty or conservatism. In fact, the kimono of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entered a period of thrilling change, influenced by encounters with Western textile production, design techniques and retailing. Inexpensive aniline chemical dyes, for instance, opened up a rainbow of hues for a tiny fraction of the cost



Figure 2: Example of a meisen kimono, showing off its daring color (bright pink and orange) and design. Courtesy of the Khalili Collections. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2d2y6ukj>.

of traditional natural dyes. Their vivid colors also gave a fresh, modern feel to an old silhouette. At the same time, kimono designers, weavers and dyers entered their goods into competition at various world's exhibitions where they took the opportunity to study Western cloth production. In 1872, for instance, a group of Kyoto weavers traveled to Lyon, France to study the latest weaving technology, and brought home a mechanized Jacquard loom which they soon copied and put to use. These sorts of innovations significantly lowered production costs, and opened up possibilities for entirely new kimono designs.

In addition to exciting new dyes and weaves, novel fabrics began reaching Japan in greater numbers. Wool had always been expensive and scarce, and therefore limited to the very powerful. But beginning in the 1870s and 1880s, the Meiji imperial government imported huge stockpiles of British, Australian and New Zealand wool to suit up its modern army and civil service. Western-style men's tailors took their share for suits and trousers, but the kimono industry seized the opportunity as well. It quickly fashioned entirely new garments, such as overcoats and winter coverings to wear over kimono, and within a few decades began successfully marketing wool and wool-cotton blend kimono.

Other changes took inspiration from Western design and art. In the 1870s and 1880s, for instance, violets, roses and trailing vines suddenly blossomed on kimono across the realm. But few trends could compete with the sensation created by a kimono style known as *meisen*. This was

a casual, everyday kimono made from hard-wearing, relatively cheap silk that could be washed at home and worn regularly. Woven on machine loom technology imported from the West and tinted with imported aniline dyes, what made meisen so thrilling were the modern designs that took inspiration from Cubism, Art Nouveau, Fauvism and other avant-garde ideas in Western high art. [Figure 2] The result was a fashion sensation, and by 1930 over half of all silk cloth produced in Japan was turned into *meisen* kimono. "Let me tell you," one woman recalled after buying her first *meisen* fabric, "I have never been happier before or after the day I purchased that roll of *meisen*. My first silk! I was so excited I could not even fall asleep that night."³

The meisen kimono boom rested upon another equally important Western influence in marketing and sales. The rise of Japanese department store culture in the 1920s and 1930s took many cues from pioneering retailers in Paris, London and New York. Amidst opulent surroundings, customers perused the latest meisen designs, peered at new styles through window displays, and took in fashion shows with models showing off the season's offerings. [Figure 3] Department stores encouraged purchases through mail order, offered same-day delivery for many items, and hired top designers to produce unique, in-house kimono designs. This novel retail experience connected kimono culture to larger trends in modern consumer culture around the world.

While all these innovations felt to people at the time very modern, they rested upon a foundation centuries old. Since the days of the samurai, kimono design had always incorporated ideas, influences and raw materials from outside Japan. The meisen kimono was, therefore, just the latest version of a long process in which fashion connected Japan to the larger world.

In the same way, the kimono stitched the larger world into Japan. The remarkable thing about fashion, after all, is that it never travels just in one direction. The desire to look fabulous and to make a statement has always meant rummaging through closets around the world for inspiration. This impulse sent the kimono on a remarkable journey that would eventually revolutionize Western women's wear.⁴

The Kimono Goes Global

The kimono first reached Europe in the early seventeenth century through the Dutch East India Company, which had a monopoly on Western trade with Japan. Many of these kimono ended up in royal closets, from Princess Amalia of Solms-Braunfels in the Hague and King Louis XIV at Versailles, to the King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania. As a kimono craze began spreading abroad, Dutch merchants urged the Japanese to speed up



Figure 3: Young Tokyo women modeling the latest fashionable meisen designs for 1930. In the background, a poster also promotes meisen kimono from Chichibu weavers in Saitama Prefecture, the leading producer of meisen. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/4ynz2jhk>.



Figure 4: A gentleman's *banyan* or kimono robe from the 1720s. The robe took its inspiration from the Japanese kimono and from Turkish wear, and its exotic appeal made it a must-have garment for gentlemen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/3rey25w7>.

production, and to modify the fit to match what they called “the Dutch fashion.” But the Japanese had neither an infrastructure for large-scale exports, nor much interest in starting one. Domestic markets kept them busy and rich enough.⁵

A Dutch East India Company agent stationed on India’s Coromandel Coast proposed a solution. He asked local weavers to make kimono based on Japanese models, and said that he could send a thousand more. Amsterdam needed to act quickly, however: “If they are successful in Europe, they can’t be kept a secret for long or the English and the French will imitate them.”⁶ He was right. Soon not even India could keep up, and private ateliers from Dublin to Warsaw rushed to fill the swelling demand. By the end of the seventeenth century a gown in Japanese style had become a gentleman’s must-have garment, made anywhere along the map from India to England.

This modified kimono went by a variety of names: in France the *robe de chambre*, in England the *banyan*, and in the Netherlands the *Japonsche rok*. Gentleman could choose between two styles, one an unbelted version modified with V-shaped inserts at the side seams for a relaxed fit; the other, a tailored gown with buttons, narrow, set-in sleeves, and skirts that flared at the waist. [Figure 4] A man wore his gown as informal loungewear at home, over a waistcoat and breeches, and accessorized with slippers and a jaunty silk cap. Released from the tyranny of powdered wig and stiff coat, a man in kimono was to read books, write letters, and receive visitors in opulent and gentlemanly style.

Brave souls have always pushed fashion trends to their limits, and the kimono gown was no exception. Although men were told to avoid wearing theirs outdoors, fashionistas naturally took to parading theirs about town. City elders in Leiden responded by banning anyone from wearing their gowns to church, no doubt because “wearing the *Japonsche rok*” had become slang for getting drunk. Harvard College in colonial Massachusetts likewise suppressed the silk gown as “inconsistent with the gravity and demeanor proper to be observed.” Any young man who persisted in its wear, trustees warned, “may not expect his degree.”⁷ By the end of the eighteenth century, the kimono gown had taken on dangerous, even rowdy associations that shadowed its earlier gentlemanly pedigree.

The kimono craze cooled in the early nineteenth century as men turned to more subdued styles, but it returned just a few decades later when Japan opened to trade in the 1850s. This time, however, it was women who seized its possibilities, first as loungewear, and later as a daring silhouette that would change Western womenswear forever.

This time Japanese merchants and craftspeople helped push the boom, but they faced some significant hurdles. Particularly troublesome was the wide band of silk at the waist, called the obi. Since a kimono has no buttons, ties or zippers, the obi keeps it closed. But those not used to tying one every day found the obi bothersome and its wide width uncomfortable. The kimono’s silhouette was another problem. Western women’s fashion used bustles and corsets to sculpt a woman’s bust and waist, but the kimono fell straight from the shoulders and gave the female body little sense of volume. In short, though many women admired its beautiful fabric and simple construction, they struggled to integrate the kimono into their wardrobes.

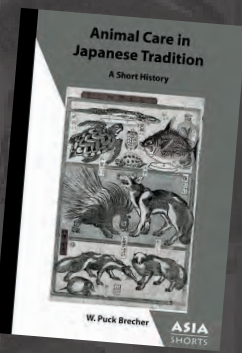
Throughout the 1870s, 80s and 90s Japanese merchants and craftspeople worked to overcome these barriers by returning to the old idea of the kimono as home wear. At countless international expositions held in Europe and North America they conducted market research to discover the colors, patterns and weaves that would sell abroad. One of the most innovative was a Kyoto shop called Iida Takashimaya, which in the 1890s began directly marketing what it called tea gowns, morning gowns, and dressing gowns designed to meet Western taste. The shop’s executives added, for instance, a pleat in the back to widen the kimono’s silhouette and make it more comfortable as loungewear. They also swapped out the large obi belt for a narrow, soft silk band in matching color, and adopted decorative motifs that matched Western expectations for “Japanese” design. By the

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early twentieth century, Iida Takashimaya had developed a whole pattern book with designs specifically targeting Western customers.

Through the efforts of Japanese merchants and craftspeople, western women began embracing the kimono as an exotic lounging gown, just as their grandfathers and great-grandfathers before them. Popular mail-order shops like A.A. Vantine’s in New York City pushed the trend forward, advertising a range of gowns available for everything between \$2.50 and \$150. [Figure 5] These garments were, one ad copy purred, “a dainty and comfortable garment for wear in the seclusion of the boudoir,” and were also easy to care for. They required “no ironing, and may be laundered repeatedly without fear of losing its shape or [its] becoming daintiness.”⁸ Another influential promoter was Liberty’s in London, founded in 1875 and the city’s leading importer of Japanese silk goods. It caught the crest of a thunderous wave of enthusiasm for Japan created by Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1885 smash hit, *The Mikado* by opening a branch shop in Yokohama where they worked with Japanese manufacturers to design and make silk clothes specifically for the export market.

By the early twentieth century, then, the kimono was back. Though at first confined to the home, a daring Parisian fashion designer known simply as *Le Magnifique* would bring it back out onto the boulevard.

Paul Poiret seemed to come out of nowhere to take the capital of fashion by storm. His startling, theatrical designs gained him increasing attention as he worked his way up from one fashion house to the next until in 1903 Poiret opened his own house. He was, he liked to say, “an artist,” and “not a dressmaker.”⁹ And the kimono inspired him.

Poiret’s clothes were not for everyone. Some were appalled by his decadence, and the way his clothes allegedly disdained the guardrails of bourgeois society. Perhaps even worse, he took his design cues, not from the glittering streets of Paris, but from the dusty markets of North Africa and the weaving cottages of Japan. He was intoxicated by sensuous colors and dramatic draping, which freed the body, rather than disciplined it. To Poiret, the kimono completely overthrew the caged and crinolined silhouette of bourgeois Paris. Its long straight lines, and its simple construction from flat, seamed pieces of fabric emphasized a new two-dimensional silhouette that fell from the shoulder, rather than emphasized the bust and waist. [Figure 6] It released women from the physical bondage of the corset and bustle, and Poiret used the kimono’s silhouette to declare war against the prim and the proper.



Figure 5: A. A. Vantine’s 1919 catalog cover and 2-page offering of kimono gowns. Vantine’s advertised itself as “The Oriental store” and sold “exotic eastern” household goods to middle class American consumers through mail order and at its New York City shop. Source: *Internet Archive* at <https://tinyurl.com/3rey25w7>.



Figure 6: A coat from Paul Poiret’s 1908 collection, showing the flowing silhouette falling from the shoulder, and the wide sleeves that were inspired by his encounter with the kimono. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yez6h7sr>.

When Poiret unleashed the kimono on the streets of Paris, he found a potential in the garment that not even the Japanese had considered.



Figure 7: Two young Japanese women in modern (Moga) fashion of the 1920s.
Source: *Vintage Everyday* at <https://tinyurl.com/5xe2r8nc>.



Paul Poiret, 1879–1944.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y2utyabd>.

To celebrate the female body's sinuous, sensuous glory, he debuted in 1911 what he called his harem pants. Two years later it was a lampshade tunic. But it was the kimono that kept reappearing in one piece after another. In 1913 it was a tunic with a kimono collar and flat contrasting panels of ivory and black silk, and a pink waistband recalling a kimono's obi. Then it was Poiret's kimono coat that became the must-have garment. Like everything Poiret designed, the kimono coat uncaged a woman's body and suggested the endless possibilities of travel and fantasy.

The kimono's influence spread far beyond Poiret's salon to impact other modernist designers as well. So, for instance, the Parisian designer and fellow style revolutionary Madeleine Vionnet also found inspiration in the kimono's loose silhouette and its potential for graphic appeal across large flat planes of fabric that fell from the shoulder. Meanwhile, those without the money to patronize elite Parisian courtiers could still participate in the style revolution by picking up needle and thread and following the newest home sewing patterns from Butterick.

When Poiret unleashed the kimono on the streets of Paris, he found a potential in the garment that not even the Japanese had considered. His "flapper" silhouette would then ricochet back across the Pacific and Japanese "modern girls" (or "moga") would pick up these dresses based on clothes in their mother's wardrobe. [Figure 7] These cross-cutting influences remind us that—whether fast or slow—fashion has always circulated globally and connected distant cultures.

Few garments may feel more deeply connected to a specific place and culture than the Japanese kimono. But even a quick survey of its history reveals the global collaborations that have turned it into a fashion icon. That should not surprise us, after all, because whether we look at a contemporary t-shirt or an eighteenth century kimono, fashion has always been a global story. ♦

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