

## V&A exhibition *Kimono, Kyoto to Catwalk* – Spring 2020

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The V&A's *Kimono, Kyoto to Catwalk* was an example of the very best kind of museum exhibition, bringing together a fabulous selection of objects and using them to tell a fascinating and carefully-researched story. The exhibition and the accompanying publication presented the kimono as both a fascinating garment in its own right, and one which provides the viewer access to many other aspects of Japanese culture, beliefs, technologies and traditions. Though the kimono has its origins in traditional Japanese culture, the exhibition argued that it should not be seen as unchanging and timeless: rather it has successfully achieved cross-cultural status, and continues to evolve in the present as a vibrant part of contemporary fashion culture.

The exhibition included over two hundred and fifty kimono and related items from the V&A itself and from collections all over the world. Credit must be given to curator Anna Jackson and her team for sourcing objects from so many different collections, and to conservators and exhibition designers for presenting the items so beautifully. Given the effort that undoubtedly went into bringing all of this together it was a great shame that the exhibition was only open for a few short weeks before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the museum to close. Regrettably, therefore, this review is based on one brief visit just after the exhibition opened before circumstances dictated that I was unable to return for a second visit. It is fortunate that the exhibition was accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, and this review draws on both the exhibition and that publication.

On the one hand the kimono or kimono-style garment is very familiar to Westerners, having influenced the loose, informal, dressing gown type garment that many of us now own. At the same time, the kimono appears entirely exotic and is a visual signifier of Japanese 'otherness'. Originally the word kimono simply meant 'the thing to wear' and the first part of the exhibition explored the beguiling simplicity of its construction. A kimono is made from a single length of fabric, cut and sewn without darts or other techniques of fabric manipulation that are common in the West. A kimono is not expected to 'fit' the body in the way that Western clothes do, a point which is important because it perhaps points to its versatility and adaptability to new contexts. At the same time, the relatively simple shape

of the kimono meant scope for focus on the decoration and embellishment of the fabric itself: the exhibition was crammed with breath-taking examples of woven, embroidered and printed silks, all executed with amazing skill and artistry [Fig 1].

The exhibition took a broadly chronological view, beginning with definitions and technical background, and exploring the kimono's place within traditional Japanese culture. The kimono was originally worn by both men and women, but while its basic shape and construction may have remained the same over many centuries, the exhibition demonstrated the rich variety of ways in which the kimono evolved as a fashion statement. The choice of fabric and the style and technique of decoration were the mark of the wearer's age, gender, wealth, taste, and their social and marital status, as well as being appropriate for the occasion and the season. Choice of accessories such as the obi (belt) and layers of inner and outer kimono in contrasting fabric contributed to making the kimono a fashionable garment of great complexity. This is itself an important point, since Westerners have tended to locate Paris as the epicentre of the world's fashion systems, and to position non-European clothing as characterized by tradition rather than dynamism. It was in part this Euro-centric definition of fashion that the exhibition sought to challenge.

As well as displaying kimono themselves, the exhibition featured examples of other kinds of objects, including woodblock prints of the Edo period (1603-1868). These images provide an indication of the Japan's sophisticated urban culture, with kimono shown as part of the rich material world of tea houses, theatres, domestic interiors and city streets. Woodblock prints of fashionable figures such as kabuki actors and courtesans were produced relatively cheaply and were circulated widely as fashion plates. Whether or not they were an accurate depiction of real life is hardly relevant; they operated at the level of fantasy and imagination as well as reportage, and undoubtedly fed into the wider fashion culture. Far from being a static and unchanging garment, these prints demonstrate that the kimono was a dynamic part of the fashion culture of Edo (modern day Tokyo), then one of the largest and most sophisticated cities in the world [Fig 2].

Having established the kimono's place within Japanese culture, the exhibition moved on to look at the kimono in relation to the West following the arrival of the Portuguese in 1543 and the Dutch in 1609. Here kimono operated as both a symbol and an instrument of cross-cultural fertilisation, from East to West and vice versa. A kimono made of French

brocaded silk, for example, spoke of the importance of trade – of objects and of ideas – between Japan and Europe from the seventeenth century onwards [Fig 3]. By that point the kimono-style garment (meaning loose, informal, of simple construction) was very much the thing for fashionable Londoners such as Samuel Pepys: it had become what the catalogue calls “geographically confused but familiarly exotic.” Here the kimono can be seen as one element of a complex story of global trade and cultural influence that began long before the point when Japan ‘opened up’ to trade with the West more fully in 1853.

In the Meiji period (1867-1912) Japan began a rapid process of industrialisation and modernisation, and Western dress began to be a signifier of modernity. The kimono started to fall out of use, at least by men, in formal, public contexts. From that point, the kimono came to be associated with the feminine and the traditional, and to be a way of signifying ‘traditional’ Japan both to the West, and within Japan itself. At the same time, the kimono’s simplicity of shape made it attractive to the many Western designers who drew on its influence in various ways. Here the exhibition featured examples of dresses designed by names familiar from the Western fashion canon, such as Paul Poiret, Lucile, and Madeleine Vionnet, showing their use of the simplicity of cutting, the squareness of sleeves and potential for simple elegance suggested by the kimono. For the close observer, this raised many interesting questions about Euro-centric definitions of ‘fashion’, and prompted re-examination of cultural assumptions about East and West.

Generally the chronological arrangement of the exhibition worked well as the visitor was led through the various inter-connecting spaces of the V&A’s exhibition galleries, culminating in a section that featured high fashion brands as well as examples from popular culture and film. Examples included the kimono-inspired garment worn by Björk (designed by Alexander McQueen) for the cover of her 1997 album, *Homogenic*, in which she appeared as a kind of exotic warrior-princess; and the costumes worn by Alec Guinness as Obi-Wan Kenobi and Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. Here the exhibition argued that kimono-inspired costumes such as these offered a kind of otherworldly-infused power that was both timeless and exotic. Visitors to the exhibition may have missed the nuances of the difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation: this question was perhaps dealt with more convincingly in the catalogue than in the exhibition itself, which argued for Japan’s active participation in the process of shaping Western perceptions of its national identity. Similarly, the exhibition made the case for the continuing importance

of kimono on the global catwalk and in Japan's street fashion, offering as it does the possibility of a form of creative self-expression that draws on tradition and resists Western notions of fast fashion, while simultaneously being entirely modern [Fig 4].

*Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* made clear how much depth and richness there is to be found in the study of kimono. While it is often understood as a traditional garment, frozen in time, the exhibition presented kimono as simultaneously traditional and entirely relevant to contemporary Japanese society. While the basic construction of kimono has remained unchanged over centuries, the exhibition demonstrated that styles, trends, the way they have been worn and what they signify have changed enormously. A kimono's decorative motifs might reference poetry or literature, or might feature visual puns or word play. These were, and continue to be, a demonstration of the taste and discernment of the wearer, a way of alluding to cultural reference points beyond mere decorative surface, while at the same time allowing for the enjoyment of that surface in its own right. In a similar way, visitors to this exhibition were able to enjoy the sheer visual beauty of the many wonderful objects but could also, if they chose, use them as a starting point for further exploration into Japanese culture, both past and present.

Fig 1. A summer kimono dating from between 1800-1850, featuring an iris and bridge motif which refers to passage in classical Japanese literature. (V&A Museum, T.87-1968)

Fig 2. An exuberant and highly decorated outer kimono depicting a kabuki actor and other theatrical motifs (V&A Museum, T.73-2014)

Fig 3. An outer kimono made in Japan from eighteenth century French silk brocade (V&A Museum, FE.200-2018)

Fig 4. A summer kimono with stencil-dyed decoration by contemporary Japanese designer, Rumi Rock, made in Tokyo, 2018 (V&A Museum, FE.2-2019)