

Kimono: A Modern History

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In *Kimono: A Modern History*, textile historian Terry Satsuki Milhaupt encourages her readers to ‘reflect deeply and broadly on what the kimono has meant at various points in its long history’ (p. 287). In this ambitious project, she identifies ‘modern’ with the period from the 1850s onwards. In Japan, the second half of the 19th century was a time of intense social and political change as well as unprecedented exposure to diverse cultures following the reopening of its ports after over 200 years of self-imposed isolation. Despite these parameters, Milhaupt’s study actually probes much further back into the history of the kimono. Through a survey that considers the uses and meanings of this garment from the 17th century to the present day, the author persuasively challenges one of the most enduring notions regarding the kimono: its status as a traditional rather than fashionable garment. Through this argument, Milhaupt allies herself with the recent push in fashion history and theory to move away from the Eurocentric notion that fashion is a uniquely Western phenomenon eventually adopted in non-Western countries.⁽¹⁾ The author asserts that ‘the following chapters consider how one Asian nation embraced modernity on its own terms – how Japan manipulated the kimono in its quest to establish a recognizable national identity in an increasingly cosmopolitan world’ (p. 25). Milhaupt examines the ‘modern kimono fashion system’ (p. 20) through an examination of the introduction of new material, patterning, dyes and techniques to kimono design and the networks of production and exchange between designers, makers, promoters and consumers of kimono in relation to their social, political, economic and cultural contexts. To do this, she draws on primary sources (including historical and contemporary kimonos, kimono fabric, woodblock prints, kimono pattern books, magazine advertisements and articles, posters, photographs and archival material) as well as secondary sources in both Japanese and English. This book is useful in familiarising the English reading audience with scholarship in the Japanese language on this subject. The book’s value and that of the research supporting it are testified to by the inspiration it provided for ‘Kimono: A Modern History’, an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (27 September 2014 – 24 January 2015). *Kimono: A Modern History* provides an excellent place for anyone interested to learn about the kimono and how the myth of it as a traditional garment associated with feminine beauty came to be.

Chapter one, ‘The foundations of a kimono fashion industry’, commences Milhaupt’s investigation of the kimono fashion system through an examination of kimono pattern books to demonstrate the ‘existence of an organized and interdependent organisation of clothing production in Japan from as early as the seventeenth

century that provided the underpinnings of ... the modern kimono fashion system' (p. 11). The author dates the first extant pattern books as having been published in 1666 and argues that they demonstrate a sophisticated organisation of production, distribution, marketing, consumption and fashionable attire in Japan in the 17th century. For example, pattern books could be used as a tool by those involved in production (e.g. designers and dyers) but also as a way through which purveyors could entice wealthy consumers as well as a means to keep regions without an established textile industry abreast of fashionable developments. Surveying pattern books over time, one can discern 'kimono design trends' (p. 13) through changes to motifs, colours and patterning featured each year. Pattern books also came to include advice on the suitability of particular styles to certain people, based on age, appearance or status. Milhaupt supports this research with a discussion of sumptuary laws issued between the 17th and 19th centuries (often broken), occurrences where named painters were commissioned to design for pattern books, and of woodblock prints featuring celebrities such as kabuki actors and courtesans, who, when depicted in a new colour or design, were imitated by fashion-conscious consumers. While the inclusion of textile practices in Japan during the 17th and 18th century may seem out of place in a book dedicated to the modern history of the kimono, this chapter crucially demonstrates how the kimono operated in a pre-modern fashion system, shattering the simplistic view of Japanese dress as static prior to renewed contact with the West in the mid-19th century.

Chapter two, 'Modernizing the kimono', discusses how new materials, designs and techniques introduced to Japan during the second half of the 19th century impacted upon the production of fibres, filaments and fabrics as well as their fashionability (who consumed them and why). She also examines the ways in which participation in international exhibitions and visits to foreign factories and workshops familiarised the Japanese with new materials and technologies that they would go on to adapt in kimono production and how this led to the development of mechanized, privatized factories alongside home-based, regional production. The production of kimonos remained largely in Japanese hands due to the particular width of kimono fabric, with which imported cloth was incompatible. This chapter not only looks at what was assimilated from the West following the reopening of Japan's ports, but importantly also considers interregional influences from Asia. Milhaupt highlights how a change in the consumer base for kimonos resulted from the establishment of the middle class during this period and how sartorial decisions were based increasingly on taste and economic status rather than dictated by birth or sumptuary laws.

While changes to the fashionable kimono are well mapped in chapter two, Milhaupt does not offer a detailed exploration of the adoption of Western dress in Japan at this time. This omission is likely explained by the parameters of investigation as implied by the book's title. There have also been many insightful discussions of the adoption of Western dress, accessories and even hairstyles in Japan during this period published in the English language, many of which Milhaupt cites.(2) However, the author does not clearly quantify to what degree Western dress was adopted at this time (very little) or elaborate on the reasons for this. Given Milhaupt's intention to more fully understand the social, political, economic and cross-cultural issues relating to Japanese fashion at this time, it would be instructional to compliment her discussion of kimono consumption with a more detailed comparison of the ways in which Western clothing was adopted or assimilated piecemeal (3) as part of the Japanese wardrobe to the retention of kimono. For example, while the Rokumeikan, a Western-style social hall that opened in Tokyo in 1883 and was intended to provide a place where Japanese and foreign officials could mingle on equal footing, receives a perfunctory mention in the book, looking more closely at the unfamiliarity in terms of culture (and particularly satire) experienced by many at this setting might have been instructive.(4) As Liza Dalby points out in her discussion of the Rokumeikan, 'coquettish dress, dancing, mixing with men – behavior now enjoined for women of the elite – was not the sort of thing that samurai wives and daughters had been brought up to feel comfortable doing' .(5)

Milhaupt's third chapter, 'Shopping for kimonos, shaping identities', examines changes to the design and marketing of kimonos in relation to shifting consumer demands and the expression of national identity in the 20th century. The author identifies the newly formed department stores in Japan as arbitrators of taste at this time. Department stores exhibited and displayed new commodities to de-emphasise their exotic nature and transform them into useful things for everyday Japanese life and as well as formed in-store design departments (usually centred on kimono and graphic design) which produced posters to advertise their wares

and magazines to educate their consumers on to behave and dress. Milhaupt demonstrates that the kimono fashion system continued to build momentum at this time: artists were increasingly commissioned as kimono designers and seasonal or yearly fashions were promoted through posters and seasonal trade shows, while popular actresses and singers modelled the latest kimonos and were emulated by consumers. Through her analysis of kimono design, women's magazines, advertising material, and Koon Wajir? and Yoshida Kenkichi's ethnographic research of people strolling around the popular shopping district of Ginza in 1925, Milhaupt argues that being modern did not necessarily mean abandoning kimono. 'The mode 'good wife, wise mother' (*tada no onna*) wore kimono patterns that were traditional and familiar so as not to draw attention to herself. Her more liberated and modern sister, the emerging 'modern girl' (*modan gaaru*), might on occasion choose to wear a trendy kimono' (p. 104).

Chapter four, 'The kimono ideal migrates west', explores the shifting meanings of the kimono through a discussion of its reception in Europe, Britain and the United States from the 1850s. What this chapter does well is to expose the historical circumstances leading to the 'misguided associations between the kimono, the geisha and courtesan' (p. 144) that emerged in the late 19th century and continue to resonate today. The author details how geisha, professional performers who had been at the forefront of fashion for centuries, stopped wearing mainstream fashions and instead became 'curators of tradition by working to preserve the classic cuts and dress' (p. 146) as a counterfoil to the *modan gaaru* of the 20th century. Given the pace of fashion in 20th-century Japan, kimonos began to be looked at nostalgically. The appearance of geishas-cum-actresses appearing on and off stage internationally in kimono at this time 'further solidified the fusion of the ideals of the kimono and the alluring Japanese female body' (p. 147). The author also explores the vital role that collectors and dealers played in heralding the aesthetic values and traditional ideal of the kimono in an exploration of the international art market. 'Recognizing outsiders' interest in kimonos, the Japanese – from institutions to private individuals – manipulated and promoted the 'kimono ideal', modifying perceptions of this form of dress' (p. 28).

Despite these insights, Milhaupt's assertion that foreign interest in kimonos centres on exoticism rather than the lived reality of kimono seems a bit simplistic. Whether kimonos were purchased as souvenirs or collected, Milhaupt asserts that these garments came to represent 'Japan as imagined by its owner, not as lived within a Japanese context' (pp. 158–9). She may have offered a more nuanced exploration through the list of Western designers influenced by kimono in form, pattern or material (e.g. Poiret, Frank Lloyd Wright) tacked on to the end of the chapter. For example, Milhaupt does show the 19th-century designer Christopher Dresser to have held a sincere interest in Japanese art and even kimono production (pp. 160, 163–4), but this could have been taken further. It is clear from Dresser's theory of good design that Japanese art not only figured among corrective Eastern examples to British industry in producing conventionalised (flat, stylised) motifs but uniquely retained a sense of the vitality of nature in depicting two dimensional forms. Dresser claimed that Japanese art was 'simple in expression, crisp in character, and conventional in nature. But there is a quality which their works possess that transcends all other merits ... the expression of life with which they endow their delineations of plants, birds, insects, and fishes; and no other people can make drawings live as can the Japanese'.⁽⁶⁾ With regard to the wider consumption of kimonos, the ease with which they could be extracted from their original Japanese context and adopted into the Western wardrobe surely supports the author's case for their fashionability. As transcultural objects operating on a world stage, many new and important meanings can be explored. For example, their availability and affordability meant that middle-class homemakers in the West could demonstrate their taste and artistic prowess through acquisition and use.⁽⁷⁾

Chapter five, 'Kimono designers', considers the increasing tension as the 20th century progresses between the kimono as a fashionable garment and the preservation and revitalisation of traditional kimono production. For example, Milhaupt demonstrates that increasingly trends in kimono design were dictated by the in-house design sections of department stores and that designers pushed kimono creation as an individual enterprise rather than group production. While the kimono was signalled as inappropriate for working women during the war period, luxury kimono production was preserved because the government wanted to protect technical skills from dying out. In 1950 the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was

passed to 'prevent the disappearance of skills in arts deemed to have historic or artistic value' and this has evolved into today's Living National Treasure system (pp. 196–7). Milhaupt muses that: 'Ironically, the struggle to protect and promote traditional crafts in an increasingly modernized, mechanized, urbanized and Westernized world may eventually have stifled their vitality and viability' (p. 197) Perhaps to combat this concern, the concluding sections of the book provide detailed biographies of individual kimono designers from the 18th century as well as those working from 1950 onward, signalling out innovation in technical execution, surface design or design concept that undermine a 'traditional' reading of the kimono.

Milhaupt's final chapter, 'Everyday and extraordinary, then and now', functions to summarize and conclude her previous chapters as well as to contemplate the use and meaning of kimonos today. In both the introduction and concluding chapter, Milhaupt stresses that in the 21st century, both in Japan and abroad, there has been resurgence in conventional and unconventional kimono wearing, where the kimono is not conceived of as a traditional garment but rather as an item of fashionable dress to manipulate. In Japan she demonstrates how in the 1960s there was a rise in kimono dressing schools as interest in wearing kimonos rekindled. However, 'what had once been a simple robe-like garment worn with a narrow belt in the seventeenth century had become so cumbersome that the average Japanese woman required assistance and instruction in order to wear a kimono' (p. 239). She also discusses the increased consumption of *yukata* (cotton kimonos) and the kimono's inspiration in couture fashion as well as subculture dress.

As the final chapter functions to sum up the previous chapters, an investigation of the uses and meanings of the kimono in Japan and globally over the past 50 years is unfortunately rather rushed. While this subject is broad enough to warrant its own book, perhaps it also can be partially explained by Milhaupt's untimely death in 2012, which resulted in the manuscript of *Kimono: A Modern History* being readied for publication by the author's husband, Professor of Law Curtis J. Milhaupt, with the assistance of Terry's colleagues. Given these tragic circumstances, this review has not dwelt on the occasional disjointed nature of the book's organisation or uneven treatment of sources, but rather has endeavoured to highlight the relevance and importance of this study within the literature on kimono history, and current scholarship on non-western fashion more widely, as well as trying to point out directions in which further developments could be made in enhancing our understanding of the transcultural meanings of the kimono. *Kimono: A Modern History* persuasively challenges the myth of the kimono as a traditional, static garment through a nuanced history of its fashion system from the 17th century to present time and sets the scene well for an in-depth look at global kimono fashion from the 1960s to present day.

Notes

1. With regard to kimono specifically, this has been most recently argued by the economic historian Penelope Francks in 'Was fashion a European invention?: The kimono and economic development in Japan', *Fashion Theory*, 19, 3 (2015), 331–62. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Liza Dalby, 'The kimono discovers itself', *Kimono Fashioning Culture* (New ed., London, 2001), pp. 65–124 and Toby Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History* (Oxford, 2009) for a discussion of both; Suzanne G. O'Brien, 'Splitting hairs: history and the politics of daily life in nineteenth-century Japan', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67, 4 (Nov 2008), 1309–39 focuses on hairstyles. Sally A. Hastings, 'The Empress' new clothes and Japanese women, 1868–1912', *Historian*, 55, 4 (1993), 677–92 focuses particularly on the adoption of Western fashion by royalty and aristocrats, particularly with regard to the Empress and women's fashion, while Nicolas Cambridge, 'Cherry-picking sartorial identities in cherry-blossom land: uniforms and uniformity', *Journal of Design History* 24, 2 (2011), 171–86 focuses on the role of uniforms in Japan from the modern period onward. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dalby, 'The kimono discovers itself' is particularly good for early examples of this as the book reproduces images from Japanese newspapers demonstrating the piecemeal adoption of particular foreign accessories and even the invention of new Japanese dress forms in response to these exciting, new accessories and garments. Likewise, these sartorial developments are well demonstrated in the woodblock prints and photographs included in Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization* (New York, NY, 1986). [Back to \(3\)](#)

4. See Slade, *Fashion a Cultural history*, pp. 93–7, for a discussion of the Rokumeikan in relation to fashion.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Dalby, *Kimono Fashioning Culture*, p. 90.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Christopher Dresser, *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufacture* (London, 1882), p. 318.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See Elizabeth Kramer, 'From specimen to scrap: Japanese textiles in the British Victorian interior, 1875–1900', in *Material Cultures, 1740–1920 The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, ed. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (Farnham, 2009), pp. 129–47, which explores the ways in which Japanese textiles, including kimonos, were incorporated into middle-class British interiors to demonstrate good taste; Elizabeth Kramer, 'Japanese inspiration and the 'art' of Victorian art needlework', *Textile special issue: East meets West* (2009-10), 19–27, which explores how the use of Japanese exemplars allowed amateur needleworkers to legitimize the artistic merits of their own work; and Elizabeth Kramer "'Not so Japan-Easy": the British reception of Japanese dress in the late nineteenth century', *Textile History*, 44, 1 (2013), 3-24, which demonstrates how aesthetes and dress reformers turned to the kimono as an exemplar of healthy and beautiful dress removed from fashion.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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