

Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain and the United States 1931-1945

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Textiles and dress occupy a central position within the realm of material culture. Apart from fulfilling the basic human need for clothing and protection, textiles play important political, economic, and religious functions. Through variations of construction and patterning, cloth also has a great capacity for communication and serves as a significant site of personal and cultural identity. Dress in particular is, by its very nature, one of the most visible of the arts. Yet it is simultaneously one of the most intimate, for while it publicly distinguishes the wearer dress is also a very private matter, one that touches our skin.

Given the nature and role of textiles, it should therefore come as no surprise to discover that they can serve as potent visual vehicles for patriotic sentiment. However, the very personal aspect of the textile arts makes the pieces that are the subject of *Wearing Propaganda* totally unexpected and today, given their often overt militaristic sentiments, even a little disturbing. With their bold and evocative designs, these textiles are certainly worthy of aesthetic consideration. But it is their wider socio-political context that is the main focus of this study, the insight that they give to the nature and role of propaganda, and the 'unique window' they offer 'into the culture of war on the Home Front' (p. 11).

It was some years ago that Jacqueline Atkins, the editor and main author of *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain and the United States 1931–1945* and the curator of the exhibition that the book accompanies, came to visit me at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London where I look after the collection of Japanese textiles and dress. I had nothing of relevance to show her, but remember the remarkable textiles—mainly fragments at that early stage in Atkins' research—that she brought to show me. Since that time, Japanese propaganda textiles have begun to garner much attention and today there are a number of significant collectors. Last year the V&A made its first acquisition in this area, a boy's winter kimono celebrating the journey of the Kamikaze-go which set the speed record for a flight from Tokyo to London in 1937, which is also the subject of two pieces illustrated in *Wearing Propaganda*. Despite this growing interest, there is little written about the subject of propaganda textiles and it is therefore wonderful to see Atkins' study come to fruition in this fascinating book (1).

Japan has a particularly rich textile history. The main focus for artistic expression is the kimono, traditionally the principal item of dress for men and women of all classes. The simple T-shaped structure of

this and associated garments such as juban (under-kimono) and haori (kimono jacket) has remained virtually unchanged since the sixteenth century. While in the West it is the cut and construction of clothing that bears witness to stylistic changes, in Japanese dress the significant site of meaning is on the surface of the garment. It was through choice of colour and, more importantly, decoration that the Japanese expressed their personal, cultural, and social sensibilities, and through which the vibrant fashion culture that existed in the Edo (1603–1868) and Meiji (1868–1912) periods can be traced. Nature, particularly seasonal references, provided a major source of design, together with allusions to classical literature, views of country and townscapes, aspects of popular culture, and visual puns. Many of the images used on kimono had complex levels of meaning, often with auspicious significance.

It was thus Japan, with its tradition of potent textile designs, that produced the most striking and varied propaganda textiles in the period 1931–1945. The objects are powerful enough to stand without comparison, but Atkins has chosen to broaden her study to include Britain and America, the other countries most closely involved with the Asia-Pacific war. I feared initially that this might skew or dilute the discussion, yet the inclusion of British and American examples provides for interesting cultural comparisons, revealing that the Japanese textiles were not an isolated phenomenon, and making the broader discussion of propaganda more useful and persuasive. In her introduction Atkins reveals the significance of these textiles and explains how they provided ‘both public and personal canvases on which to express patriotic sentiments, and ... acted as visible markers of national unity, tangible testimony to military and national goals’ (p. 19). The book is then divided into four parts. Part 1, ‘Setting the context’, provides a general background to the textiles, the Asia-Pacific war, and the role of propaganda, while part 2, ‘The visual culture of war’, explores the unique iconography of the period. The core of the study is presented in part 3, ‘Wearing propaganda: fashion, textiles and morale on the home front’, and the book concludes with a look at specific designs in part 4, ‘An arsenal of designs: themes, motifs, and metaphors in propaganda textiles’.

Propaganda textiles were produced and consumed in reaction and relation to a very particular set of circumstances, explored in the opening chapter of section 1, ‘Setting the context’, by Atkins, which provides a succinct outline of the growing tensions and events that led to conflict in Asia and World War II. In ‘Propaganda on the home front: clothing and textiles as message’, Atkins explores the way in which visual propaganda was used in Japan, Britain, and America as a way of galvanizing and unifying citizens into acceptance of national and military goals. Textiles proved an excellent medium for delivering such messages, and items were created that not only reflected national ideology but were striking, fashionable, and, therefore, appealing on a number of levels. Atkins explores the production and marketing of propaganda textiles in the West but, although it was briefly touched upon in the introduction, what is missing here is a similar discussion about Japan. I would have liked to know more about who created these textiles, who sold them, and how customers commissioned or chose them. What is interesting, and fully discussed, is the way in which propaganda textiles were used in different ways in the East and West. In Britain and America, as one might imagine, they were designed to be seen and recognized. Propaganda iconography was used on textiles for clothing, accessories such as headscarves, and domestic furnishings such as bedspreads, tablecloths, napkins, and even, in America, feed sacks. In Japan, however, propaganda imagery appears predominantly on men’s juban and haori linings (2). In other words they were private, rather than public, images. That the Japanese did not wear such sentiments on their (outer) sleeves does not reflect a lack of patriotic fervour. Indeed in many ways it meant that they aligned themselves to the nation’s goals on an even more intimate level. The tradition of using vibrant designs on under-garments or linings has its historical roots in the sumptuary laws issued at various points during the Edo period forbidding lower sections of society from wearing particular fabrics and using particular colours and decorative techniques. Those with money and style, however, found ways to circumvent such rules, and a fashion developed for wearing extravagant linings and under-garments beneath a more sombre and permitted exterior. This taste continued even when, with the end of the Edo period, such laws were no longer enforced. In Japan such hidden images can also serve a symbolic function, the auspicious motifs wrapping the wearer in divine protection. This belief in the literal, as well as figurative, power of images is revealed in the other major manifestation of propaganda textiles in Japan, kimono for boys, particularly those worn on festive and

celebratory occasions. In these garments military motifs were combined with traditional ones as metaphors for bravery, loyalty, strength and filial piety—expressions of both parental hopes and the magical transference of such qualities.

The important way in which patterns function symbolically in Japan is further discussed by Atkins and Miyuki Otaka in 'Propaganda precedents', which looks at pre-1930 examples. Earlier propaganda textiles in both East and West tended to commemorate particular episodes and people, providing individuals with mementos that allowed them to incorporate great national events into their own daily lives. In the twentieth century images were increasingly used as a way of boosting public morale, something that would figure strongly in wartime textiles. Although the propaganda textiles produced both before and during the Asia-Pacific war often incorporated government slogans and imagery, they were not officially sanctioned goods. Rather they were produced in response to market demand and thus reflected the public enthusiasm for items 'that helped to shape and sustain a sense of national pride and unity' (p. 89).

Section 2 opens with 'Japan's beautiful modern war' by John Dower, which looks at the context within which Japanese propaganda textiles were created. Japan's occupation of Manchuria, its war with China, and its expansion into South-East Asia were presented as necessary and legitimate acts; propaganda that proved enormously persuasive to a populace that had little real knowledge of what was happening in Asia and the wider world. Attacks on Anglo-American values were combined with proclamations of traditional and unique Japanese values tied, particularly in the early years of the war, to images of the country as positive and forward-looking. As Dower points out, such concepts of modernity were crucial to the Japanese national psyche, and had been central to the ethos of the Taisho period (1912–1926), which saw cities such as Tokyo develop into places of consumerism and mass entertainment where *Modanizumu*, 'modernism', became the catchword of the day. Symbols of this modernity—skyscrapers, fast cars, aeroplanes—were used in advertising, graphic design, and even on kimono. With increased militarization in the late 1920s and 1930s, such iconic images were expanded to include the paraphernalia of Japan's modern war such as battleships and military vehicles. As Dower so eloquently puts it, 'no one else beautified war with such panache or wore the war so literally' (p. 110).

In 'Potatoes are protective, too: cultural icons of Britain at war', Antonia Last explores the rich, complex and often unstable iconography of war. Through discussions of barrage balloons and blackout curtains she examines the war's 'radical assault' on gender roles. Women's mobilisation was central to Britain's war effort, yet threatened to undermine traditional notions of civil stability and lead to unacceptable psychological, social, or political aspirations. While her image might become increasingly masculine, a woman was also required to retain her femininity. And despite her heroic efforts on farms and in ammunition factories, she was perceived as a danger to the nation, easy prey for the squander bug and, more crucially, the enemy because of her 'natural' propensity to gossip—as reflected in the 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' campaign (3). The American government, which also needed to persuade women to enter the workforce, had to counter prevailing racist attitudes as well in their attempt to overcome labour shortages. Powerful posters were produced showing white and black men working together under slogans such as 'United we Win'. These are discussed by Marianne Lamonaca in her essay, 'An American vision: propaganda on the home front during World War II', which examines the government agencies established to provide information and the tactics they used to disseminate propaganda and influence public opinion.

The third and largest section of the book opens with three chapters that turn again to the subject of Japan. In 'Extravagance is the enemy: fashion and textiles in wartime Japan', Atkins looks at the modernization of the Japanese textile industry in the late-nineteenth century. Technical advances such as the development of new fabrics and the introduction of chemical dyes offered textile designers great opportunities to create exciting new patterns to suit modern taste. The cut of kimono remained the same, but the designs bore an unmistakably modern flavour as motifs were dramatically enlarged or distorted. The bold designs seen on the propaganda textiles are an extension of these developments. By the late 1930s however, Japan was beginning to feel the effects of the war. Slogans such as 'Extravagance is the Enemy' encouraged frugality, and in 1940 stringent restrictions were introduced. Certain textile craft industries were allowed to continue

as it was considered important to preserve traditional practices, but lack of raw materials, particularly silk, did begin to affect production seriously. Clothing styles were regulated by the Welfare Ministry, but only monpe (loose trousers) were generally adopted, not because they were patriotic but because they were practical.

The contrast between officially-sanctioned civilian wartime dress and the striking propaganda designs is highlighted in a fascinating chapter by Kashiwagi Hiroshi, 'Design and war: kimono as "parlour performance" propaganda'. The pleasures of 'hidden' decoration, as discussed by Atkins in chapter 1, arose in part as a response to Edo period sumptuary laws. These rules were designed to distinguish status and served to remind people of their place in the social hierarchy, while the introduction of wartime dress aimed to join all citizens together in a visible expression of patriotic unity. The propaganda images used on men's juban and haori differed because they were concealed and thus known only to the wearer. However, they would sometimes be revealed in a private room (zashiki) or parlour to a few close friends who could appreciate the design and would, one assumes, share the patriotic spirit the patterns embodied. This concept of dress as 'parlour performance' (ozashiki) relates to notions of play (asobi) that are a key element of Japanese aesthetics and which, during the Asia-Pacific war, became in themselves a form propagandist expression.

The restrictions placed on clothing and all aspects of people's life in wartime Japan are discussed in more detail by Wakakuwa Midori in the chapter 'War-promoting kimono'. Despite the limitations that such regulations imposed, it seems that until the war with America large numbers of kimono were still produced, many, as this book reveals, featuring designs with war-related themes. Wakakuwa discusses the importance of motifs in Japanese dress and the auspicious powers with which such designs were believed to be imbued, before looking at specific propaganda examples.

If the power of textile motifs was implicitly understood in Japan, in the West too certain objects took on talismanic qualities as Pat Kirkham reveals in 'Keeping up home front morale: "beauty and duty" in wartime Britain'. Moreover the intrinsic importance and significance of dress is revealed by the fact that so many of the debates about morale, duty, and patriotism were played out in the arena of fashion. This is something that emerges very clearly in Kirkham's absorbing essay, which examines the British government's attempts to find a balance between saving scarce materials and maintaining home front morale. Women were seen as key to civilian morale and much of the discourse about appearance was aimed at downplaying the instabilities, not just of war itself, but also of the shifting gender roles created by women's mobilization. Women were forced to make enormous sacrifices during the war, but at the same time were expected to 'keep up a front' as beauty became a duty. What is particularly effective in Kirkham's chapter is the way in which she evokes a sense of the personal experience of women through the voice of fifty-one year old Nellie Last, who wore her 'gayest frock' and made up 'rather heavily' to help her face the day when her youngest son went off to fight (p. 207). Kirkham discusses underwear, stockings, scarves, and cosmetics—particularly lipstick—revealing how emotionally charged such items were. They provided both important psychological links with the prewar period and an imagined future, and served as magical protectors and markers of resistance. A theme that reveals itself in many of the chapters of *Wearing Propaganda* is the blurring of the boundaries between public and private that occurred during the war. This is made clear again by Kirkham in the way in which beauty, which one would normally associate with self-identity and the private world, became a crucial part of the public arena, an outward sign of patriotism and civic duty.

One of the greatest signifiers of women's 'emancipation, economic independence, commitment, and glamour' (p. 236)—the headscarf—is the focus of Paul Rennie's chapter, 'London squares: the scarves of wartime Britain'. This apparently simple accessory was in fact replete with meaning in wartime Britain. Rennie analyses the motifs used on scarves and discusses the varied production and marketing strategies of leading textiles firms such as Jacquemar and Ascher. The image of a woman wearing a headscarf, together with the slogan 'The girl he left behind him is still behind him', opens Beverley Gordon's chapter, 'Showing the colors: America'. During the war, the physical labour of American women was seen as an extension of their domestic duties, with images such as the powerful—and incredibly enduring—Rosie the Riveter

casting women as heroic workers. Gordon, like Kirkham, reveals how in the West, as in Japan, textiles could embody symbolic power as with 'victory' quilts, 'comfort' items knitted for servicemen, and the pillowcases they sent back from the front bearing 'I forget-you-not' sentiments. America was in a unique position during the war, for although it had to endure shortages and adapt to utility dress, it came late into the conflict and was never under direct attack. With Europe in ruins, America suddenly found itself the fashion centre of the world. As Gordon shows, the styles that emerged combined elements of the American pioneer spirit, Hollywood glamour, and concepts of leisure and relaxation. The resulting fresh, easy-going look endured well beyond the war, forming the essence of modern America style.

The final section of the book looks at the objects under discussion in more detail. In 'An arsenal of design: themes, motifs and metaphors in propaganda textiles', Atkins discusses the way in which designs function and how in propaganda textiles the use of familiar visual conventions allowed for the introduction of newer and often more radical motifs. The broadest range of elements are seen in Japanese propaganda textiles, in which celebrations of modernity, empire and nation, playful images of child soldiers, and scenes of battleships and warplanes are combined with familiar auspicious motifs such as Mount Fuji. British and American propaganda textiles are more limited in scope. In Britain the focus is on home front ideals in which government-sponsored campaigns are cleverly and often humorously utilized by designers, while in America the emphasis is on patriotism and victory. Atkins then goes on to explore specific motifs and examples under the headings of modernity and tradition, empire, militarism, patriotism, the enemy, leaders and heroes, sacrifice, alliances, slogans and songs, animals, and victory.

The final section of the book is followed by a glossary and bibliography, and a checklist of the *Wearing Propaganda* exhibition. The book also contains useful maps and a detailed timeline, as well as extended captions to the illustrations. Curiously, however, it does not have an index and I also missed notes on the authors, some of whom were not familiar to me. These are very minor points however, for this is a book with very high production values. It is beautifully produced, the illustrations certainly doing justice to the wonderful objects. Although there is inevitably some overlap between chapters, they are all absorbingly and lucidly written.

Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain and the United States 1931–1945 covers a remarkable amount of ground and gives much food for thought. In dealing with this important period and these striking and significant objects the book makes an enormous contribution, both to the study of the persuasive power of wartime propaganda and to the understanding of the capacity of textiles and dress to communicate and motivate. It has been a pleasure to read and to look at. I am sure I shall return to it often.

Notes

1. The collection of Jeffrey Montgomery, which contains some propaganda textiles, has recently been published in *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth Century Japan*, ed. Annie van Assche (Milan, 2005). Liza Dalby briefly discusses Japanese wartime dress in *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (New Haven and London, 1993). British wartime fashions have also received attention, notably from Pat Kirkham, one of the contributors to *Wearing Propaganda*. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Propaganda images were generally considered too masculine for women's garments, although there are a few exceptions. There are also examples of women's obi (the sash that secures the kimono) with images of battleships, airplanes and bombs, albeit rather subtly rendered. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The Squander Bug was a hairy insect, usually with Nazi swastikas on his belly, who urged citizens to waste food and splurge on the high street. In one advert he was shown whispering to a woman in her sleep. The most famous manifestation of the 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' campaign are the series of secret-leaking scenes drawn by Fougasse which show people—often women—gossiping while Hitler, hiding or in disguise, listens in. These cartoons appeared on women's dress fabric and headscarves. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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