ARTIST DESIGNERS OF THE TOKUGAWA PERIOD

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When Japan’s policy of national isolation went into effect early in the Tokugawa period (1603-1867) it represented the first serious break in her cultural relations with China, which, for more than a thousand years, had been the fountainhead of inspiration for Japanese scholars and artists. Thereafter, for the next two and a half centuries, Japan had to depend on her own artistic skills and on the limited resources of her tiny island empire for the implementation of those skills. As it turned out, a wholly new repertory had to be shaped to meet the taste of the rich urban population which developed during the first century of the Tokugawa regime and which, in a relatively short time, set up an unprecedented demand for colorful works of art.

The best artists of the period accordingly devoted their talents to the development of new forms, and by the latter part of the seventeenth century two popular movements were in full swing. One of these, known as Ukiyo-e, or “Pictures of the Floating World,” was a unique creation of the artisan class, whose painters and print artists drew most of their inspiration from street scenes, from the gay life of the demimonde, and from the theater. The other movement took shape under the leadership of three great artists—Koyetsu (1556-1637), Sotatsu (active 1624-1637), and Korin (1661-1716)—who, through classicists by training, originated bold new styles of painting and of lacquer and pottery decoration that were to have an incalculable influence on the aesthetic standards of future generations.

The exhibition currently on view in the galleries of the Costume Institute emphasizes one aspect of the Ukiyo-e school that has hitherto been pretty much overlooked, not only in the West but also in Japan. Although the color prints and paintings that carry the Ukiyo-e banner have always been regarded as the highest expression of this particular school, the decorative patterns created for women’s kimono, especially those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, also constitute a unique development of the Tokugawa period and one that is, in fact, more closely related to classic traditions than the prints and paintings. During the early part of the twentieth century Shojiro Nomura, who had long been interested in textiles, began to recognize the importance of the early kimono and set about collecting them from all over the Japanese islands. In 1927 he published a hundred of the best examples in his collection in full color and in 1932 another group of a hundred. A loan exhibition of some of these handsome robes, which had long been envisioned, has finally been accomplished through the good offices of Shizue Nomura, the present owner of the collection, and with the co-operation of the Japan Society of New York. The Nomura loan includes a representative group of the kimono and also fine examples of obi (sashes) and hair ornaments, which were essential accessories in Japanese fashions, as well as some handsome purses de-

Fragment of a brocaded obi, or sash, showing a lady of fashion and her attendants. XIX century. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1893
Kosode, or short-sleeved kimono, of black rinzu (damask with a self-tone pattern of swastika diaper and floral motives). The kimono has fine horizontal stripings of gold paint and is decorated with flower-filled leaf shapes executed in tie-dyeing and embroidery. It is dated about 1615–1643. The kimono illustrated on these pages are part of a collection lent by Shizue Nomura for the current exhibition of Japanese costumes and decorative arts.

signed for both men and women. With the addition of costumes and accessories from the Museum's collection and from several other lenders, the exhibition presents a fairly extensive showing of formal and informal dress for various classes of Japanese society in the Tokugawa period. Because they exemplify the most richly varied category of the popular arts of the period these costumes have been made the keynote of the present exhibition.
Kosode of brown rinzu, with a pattern of a broad river and flowering natane (plants of the rape family) executed in resist-dyeing and embroidery in couched gold thread. Probably made in the last half of the XVII century.
Only once in the earlier history of Japan, in the Fujiwara era (898–1185), did the designing of women’s costumes assume the importance it had during the Tokugawa regime, and the two periods offer an interesting contrast in standards of taste. Dress in the Fujiwara era was a matter of concern only to the aristocracy, a small, self-contained unit of society whose outlook on life was almost entirely aesthetic. Every aspect of the individual’s existence was imbued with the most exquisite refinement, which found expression in beautiful calligraphy and painting, in poetry and music, in human relationships, and in dress. Women played an important role in this elegant society, and it is in the diaries, romances, and poetry of writers like Lady Murasaki, Sei Shonagon, and Komachi that we catch fleeting glimpses of the poetic canons of taste that dictated the fashions of the day. For great ceremonial occasions court ladies wore the long-trained, many-layered costumes of contrasting colors (sometimes twelve or more) that have ever since been required for important court functions, each color identified by the name of a flower and worn only at its appropriate season. For less formal occasions there were simple but exquisite kimono like those described by Lady Murasaki in The Tale of Genji: “a kirtle yellow without and flowered within, lightly diapered with the red plum-blossom crest”; “a dress white without and green within, what is called ‘willow-weaving,’ with an elegant Chinese vine-scroll worked on it”; “a white kirtle with a spray of plum blossom on it, and birds and butterflies fluttering hither and thither, cut somewhat in the Chinese fashion, with a very handsome dark purple lining.”

The women of the Tokugawa bourgeoisie quite naturally favored more showy plumage than the elegant beauties of the Fujiwara aristocracy, and the artists of the period created for them a splendid repertory of kimono patterns that was varied beyond the limits of the imagination. This bold assertion that artists were directly concerned with women’s fashions requires a word of explanation, since the role of the Ukiyo-e masters in this branch of the decorative arts has never been clearly defined. Japanese records make it quite clear that the figure prints of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were inexpensive and widely circulated throughout the islands, were in effect the Vogue and Theatre Arts Magazine of their time because they depicted fashionably dressed women of all classes and famous actors, many of whom specialized in women’s roles. Styles currently popular in the capital were thus advertised freely by the print artists, and it is known that the wives and daughters of rich merchants in out-lying districts imitated the showy fashions of the demimonde that came to their attention through this medium.

Curiously enough, the Ukiyo-e print masters seem to have achieved little recognition at this time, either for the unique quality of their prints or for the part they played as creators as well as popularizers of women’s fashions. Not until the early twentieth century, in fact, was the artistic excellence of the prints recognized in Japan, and then only because Western collectors and museums were eagerly buying up as many of them as they could lay hands on.

It is now known that several of the most famous of the Tokugawa artists actually designed kimono at one time or another in their careers, and the assumption that the practice was widespread is, I believe, verifiable from the costumes themselves. The delicately balanced equilibrium of the asymmetrical patterns on most of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kimono proclaims them to be the work of artists rather than mere craftsmen. The creation of designs like these required brush techniques that few if any craftsmen would have mastered, and it is not difficult to imagine that artists accustomed to working within the more sharply circumscribed limits of print-making found relaxation in this freer use of the brush.

It is apparent that the elder Nomura was aware of the role of the print masters in the field of kimono decoration, because many of the robes in his collection are catalogued as “style of” or “preference of” particular artists. Whether these attributions were based on verifiable historical evidence or on a comparison with costume decoration in specific prints and paintings the Nomura catalogue does not, unfortunately, make clear. There can be no doubt, however, that further research in both fields will in time pro-
Kosode of aubergine crepe with a design of snowy witch-hazel branches in resist- and tie-dyed techniques and embroidered with colored silks. Described in the Nomura catalogue as a model of the Kyoho era (1716–1735).
Kosode of white silk decorated with a pattern of a flowering plum tree, dandelions, and violets. Painted and signed by Hoitsu (1761–1828), a follower of Korin, who is also known to have painted kimono patterns.
Kosode of white rinzu with a design of branching kinoko and chrysanthemum sprays, symbols of longevity, executed in tie-dyeing and embroidery in colored silks and gold thread. Attributed to the last half of the XVII century.
Furisode, or long-sleeved kimono, of white rinzu decorated with bamboo trees and stylized clouds enclosing four-petaled blossoms. Executed in tie-dyeing and embroidery in colored silks and gold thread. Late XVII century
Early XIX century stencils used for repeat patterning in colors on kimono. Elaborate patterns of this sort were first done with the brush by painters, who sometimes also cut the stencils themselves in order to ensure perfect reproductions of their designs. Double sheets of specially treated mulberry paper were used for the stencils, a mesh of human hair or of very fine silk threads being stretched between them to hold each detail of the cutout firmly in position. In silk-screen printing, which is the Western equivalent of the Japanese stenciling process, silk gauze is used to support the pattern. Gift of Mrs. Horace Havemeyer, 1942, and Clarence McKenzie Lewis, 1953
and to fabrics for priests' and actors' robes. It therefore became necessary to devise new and cheaper methods of decoration for kimono. Japanese craftsmen met this need by perfecting several techniques for pattern-dyeing and by improving their embroidery. Unlike weaving, which as a rule required symmetrical repeat patterns, these hand techniques could be adapted to any kind of design, so that artists were free to exploit their brush techniques to the utmost.

The role of the weaver was thus considerably diminished, but it was not entirely eclipsed. Damask weaves with self-tone patterns of swastika diaper and floral motives, which the Japanese call rinzu, were favored for kimono because their soft pliability made them especially suitable for tie-dyed designs, and as the vogue for pattern-dyeing grew, the muted elegance of these monochrome rinzu damasks lent added distinction to the art of the dyer.

Tie-dyeing (ko-kechi) became the most popular pattern-dyeing technique of the seventeenth century. Several variants of it can be noted in

provide a valuable frame of reference for the study of costume history.

The lovely asymmetrical kimono patterns of the Tokugawa artists were indirectly the result of the economic pressures of the period. For nearly three centuries before the Exclusion Act went into effect those who could afford to do so wore robes made of rich brocades imported from China or of silk decorated lavishly with embroidery and gold-painted patterns. In the latter part of the sixteenth century the Japanese began to weave their own brocades, but whenever possible Chinese silk and gold thread were used because they were superior to the Japanese products. When trade with China was all but shut off in 1637 brocade-weaving became so expensive that within a few years it was officially decreed that kimono lengths had to be reduced from twenty-two yards of 13 ¼ inch material to eleven yards. Several decades later—about 1680—brocade was restricted to obi material.

Court lady in ceremonial costume, color print by Kiyonaga (1752–1815). About 1790. Rogers Fund, 1936
the silver is soft, etc.; "fish-egg" outlined decoration. Century, leaf attributed gold cating green, Ukiyo-e at Li
ding impressionistic horizontal thread, to the nails that are involved with the earliest pattern-dyeing tech-
gniques. The kimono designs of the period: kanoko, which is the finest, involved tying the fabric on tiny
silver nails to produce the familiar crinkled "fish-egg" or "eye-painting" patterns; shibori, or large-area tying, was employed to reproduce soft, impressionistic shapes of leaves, shells, horns, etc.; and boshi-shibori, in which the patterns were outlined on the material and carefully pulled together with basting threads before dyeing, was used to ensure sharply defined contours.

The earliest kimono in the Nomura group, attributed to the first half of the seventeenth century, reflects old as well as new trends in its decoration. It is of black rinzu, gold-painted in fine horizontal lines, and has a design of bold leaf shapes, outlined in bands of kanoko and filled with floral arabesques embroidered in colors and gold thread, which swoop from the shoulders almost to the hem. The Nomura catalogue lists this kimono as "Matabei's preference," indicating that it was either designed by the famous Ukiyo-e painter Matabei (1578–1650) or was given his nod of approval at one of the popular kimono-judging contests at which he presided.

After the fires of 1657 and 1661, which ravaged the cities of Yedo (Tokyo) and Kyoto, the orders for replacements of kimono and obi created such a problem for dyers and kimono-makers that it became necessary to develop simpler styles of decoration. Consequently, large-scale open patterns featuring simple abstract motives and bold flowing lines that could be effectively reproduced in the boshi-shibori technique with a few accents of embroidery and kanoko were devised. This kind of patterning predominates in the book illustrations and single prints of Moronobu (1625–1694), the first of the print artists. Moronobu is known to have done kimono designs before he took up painting and print-making, and there can be little doubt that he helped to shape the trend of costume decoration at this time.

The Moronobu style was maintained through most of the Kwanbun era (1661–1673), but in the following decade the patterns blossomed out with charming combinations of flowers with books, boats, puzzle characters, winding streams, and the like. These were executed in boshi, kanoko, and embroidery in colored silks and gold thread. It was in this period that the taste of the parvenu asserted itself, and thereafter kimono patterns became mélange of flowers, trees, grasses, birds, beasts, bridges, fans, bamboo fences and curtains, verse cards, scenes from the Genji tales, picnic pavilions, waterfalls—everything, in fact, that exemplified the holiday spirit abroad in the land during this peaceful and prosperous time. All of the most costly techniques were employed in developing the patterns, kanoko being used for large-area patterning and gold-thread embroidery on a lavish scale.

This riot of extravagance was curbed temporarily by the sumptuary laws of 1683, which spelled the doom of brocades for kimono, but the Genrokuen era (1688–1703) ushered in another period of overelaboration in costume design. Two new pattern-dyeing techniques were, however, invented at this time to reduce the cost of...
kimono. These were a stenciled or block-printed imitation of *kanoko*, a much quicker but less effective technique than the true knotted tie-dye method, and *ro-kechi*, a resist-dyeing process.

Solving the problem of resist-dyeing was by all odds the most important development of the period in the field of costume decoration. The resist-dyed Chinese silks in the eighth-century Shosoin collection at Nara had for centuries intrigued Japanese dyers, and their interest was kindled anew when the first Javanese cotton batiks reached the islands via Dutch ships in the sixteenth century. They were able to imitate the latter by using stencils and wax resists on grass-fiber cloth, but not until a rice-paste resist was developed by Morikage (about 1665) were they successful in adapting the process to silk.

Pattern-dyeing by the resist method was finally perfected about 1700 by Yuzen, a fan-painter. Yuzen’s skill in handling intricate patterns and in color blending brought him immediate as well as lasting fame. Several splendid resist-dyed kimono, with no supplementary decoration of any kind, are included in the Nomura loans to the exhibition, none of them perhaps done by the master himself but all worthy of a great tradition, and almost all of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century kimono are at least partly decorated with resist-dyed patterns.

After new sumptuary laws went into effect early in the eighteenth century, patterns temporarily became smaller in scale and featured fairly simple renderings of birds, flowers, snowy pines, and comparable subjects. More elaborate schemes reappeared later from time to time, however, throughout the greater part of the century. Most of the designs were executed in resist-dyeing combined with brief accents of *kanoko* and embroidery. Because wide obi had become fashionable the focus of attention was now centered on the lower part of the kimono, patterning on the top often being unrelated to that of the bottom or omitted entirely. The wearing of crests (*mon*) on the shoulders of the kimono became popular at this time, not only with aristocratic women of ancient lineage but also with middle-class women, who selected any objects that caught their fancy and made them into fake crests (*date-mon*).

During the last decade of the eighteenth century it again became necessary to devise cheaper methods of decoration for kimono. Thereafter wood-block printing (*kyo-kechi*) was much used for all-over patterns, and during the first quarter

*Reverse and obverse of the lid of a writing box attributed to Korin (1658–1716). The box is of black lacquer, and the decoration of a hilly landscape with young bracken and a peasant carrying an enormous load of faggots is modeled in gold lacquer and inlaid with pewter and mother-of-pearl. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929*
of the nineteenth century stenciled repeat patterning in full color became the vogue. Kimono decorated by these methods were not, however, highly prized in Japan. Except when done in shimmering damask weaves or in rich, gold-en-crusted brocades, in which color changes could be introduced at will, repeat patterning has never been popular in the Far East, where for centuries delicately balanced asymmetrical designs have predominated in the decorative arts as well as in painting. Moreover, kimono decorated with such patterns were not necessarily or even probably “originals” in the sense of being one of a kind, since blocks and stencils could be used for patterning two or three kimono lengths before being discarded. Yet, to judge from the early nineteenth-century stencils that have been acquired by Western museums and collectors, many of the stenciled silks must have been extraordinarily beautiful. A large proportion of these stencils could only have been designed by the foremost artists of the period. Hoitsu (1761–1828), a follower of Korin, was one of the outstanding artists of the early nineteenth century, and his interest in kimono decoration is attested by an example in the Nomura group on which he himself painted a handsome flowering plum-tree pattern directly on the silk. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that artists like Hoitsu, as well as the Ukiyo-e print masters, were responsible for the best of the stencil patterns used for kimono decoration at this time.

By 1830 the Japanese economy had become so weakened by the profligacy of the middle classes that the strongest sumptuary laws of all time were promulgated. Silk in any form for the population at large was barred, and the only decoration that was allowed for cotton and hemp kimono was a touch of resist-dyeing on the front lower corners or a narrow lower border of dyed patterning with tiny accents of embroidery or painted details. Although these laws were repealed a few years later, the arts of kimono decoration did not again achieve real distinction until several decades after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

This brings us to a regrettably brief consideration of a few of the Ukiyo-e artists who can be assumed to have played an important part in the decoration of kimono during the Tokugawa period.

Moronobu, whose scrupulously detailed renderings of costumes of the Yoshiwara beauties started a vogue that lasted well into the nineteenth century, has already been mentioned as the earliest of the Tokugawa designers. Torii Kiyonobu I (1664–1729) gave a new direction to the Ukiyo-e movement by turning to the theater for many of his subjects and by adding color to his black and white prints with the brush. Kiyonobu I served his apprenticeship under his father, a painter of theatrical signboards, and it was from this early association with bold designing that he is said to have developed his characteristic style of massing conspicuous forms within heavy outlines (see cover). A comparable style is to be noted in prints done by pupils of Kwaigetsudo, an early eighteenth-century artist, whose paintings of courtiers are marvels of stateliness and dignity.

Block printing in color did not begin until some time in the early eighteenth century. Harunobu (1725–1770), the first to employ the full polychrome method in printing, specialized in studies of young girls, and his color effects are exquisitely suited to his subjects.

The color process was brought to perfection by Kiyonaga (1752–1814), whose delineation of court ladies is considered to be unsurpassed by anything in Ukiyo-e after the primitives of Moronobu, Kiyonobu I, and their contemporaries.

The work of these and many other Ukiyo-e artists who specialized in feminine types constitutes a remarkable record of women’s fashions over a period of nearly two hundred years. And costume-designing was not their only extra-curricular activity. Some of them created patterns for lacquers, potters, and metalworkers. The designs done for artisans were often classical in style, which confirms the impression that the Ukiyo-e masters were traditionalists as well as innovators. Except for the independent styles and methods of Koyetsu, Sotatsu, Korin, and their followers, decorative design was still largely dominated by Chinese influence and by that of Japanese classical schools. The reflection of the noble brushwork of great painters is especially pronounced in the designs of many of the painted
and modeled lacquers and in the exquisite metalwork of sword furniture.

In contrast to the exuberant outpourings of the Ukiyo-e school, the art of the great independents of the period is magnificently individual and detached. Koyetsu and Sotatsu together developed a unique style of painting in which abstract forms, masses, and tones were combined with natural forms and colors. Korin extended and enriched this style until it became peculiarly his own. His daring use of gold and brilliant colors in his screen paintings is too well known to require comment, and it is not in this medium, moreover, that his flair for decorative effects is most closely related to the subject at hand. It was as a lacquerer that Korin exerted the greatest influence on the genre tradition. His vigorous, impressionistic patterns, executed in sharply contrasted textures and masses of lacquer, pewter, shell, and pottery, were marked by unerring taste as well as ingenuity and set a high standard indeed for the purely Japanese style of decoration that was being developed under his leadership.

Other famous artists of the Korin school were Korin’s brother Kenzan, a painter and potter; Risuo (1663-1747) and Hanzan (eighteenth century), who were lacquerers; the painter Hoitsu, who was the most zealous exponent of the Korin tradition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century; and Zeshin (1807-1891), a painter and lacquerer, whose work is considered by many to surpass that of the earlier followers of Korin. Through these and other artists of the late Tokugawa period the influence of Korin was kept alive at a time when the fads and fancies of the Ukiyo-e movement might well have inundated the lofty aesthetic concepts of earlier centuries. The Korin tradition is still a potent force in present-day Japan, where even the simplest household utensil more often than not reflects the exquisite refinement taught and practiced by this great master. It is a tradition that we of the West have scarcely begun to appreciate.

An unpublished history of Japanese costume, written some years ago by Helen Benton Minnich in collaboration with the late Shojiro Nomura, has been consulted freely during the preparation of this article.