An Aristocracy of Robes

by ALAN PRIEST Curator of Far Eastern Art

This exhibition, recently opened in our Special Exhibition Galleries, is primarily a display of the robes worn by the rich women of Japan. We have supplemented the robes with examples from our collection of Japanese screens.

The nucleus of the exhibition is a loan from Mr. and Mrs. Shizuoo Nomura of some two hundred and fifty robes. These cover a period of nearly four hundred years. One hundred and fifty of these robes are complete. About a hundred of them are incomplete and have been mounted on two-fold gold paper screens.

The collection was originally made by Mr. Shojiro Nomura, the father of Mrs. Shizuoo Nomura. Mr. Shojiro Nomura was one of the earliest of modern collectors to pay serious attention to the history of Japanese costume. The history of the collection is interesting. When a great lady of Japan died one or more of her choicest robes were given to her favorite temple that they might be cut up and used for the magnificent and varied priest robes—thus in a way continuing her religious devotion. The robes of Buddhist priests are divided into squares for, gorgeous as they are, they symbolize the rags of poverty.

Mr. Shojiro Nomura was able to retrieve many of these by making monetary gifts to the temple, continuing the good works of the original donors and at the same time making a collection of inestimable value to historians of Japanese costume. Many times Mr. Nomura would find only parts of a robe unused. He hit upon the device (since much copied) of mounting the incomplete robes on screens. Enough was left or could be pieced out to give the appearance of a complete robe.

Another very different but spectacular loan is of three robes used in the moving picture "The Gate of Hell." These are loaned by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Harrison and show how expertly the Japanese can revive an ancient art. For contrast we show a series of No robes formerly in the collections of Mr. and Mrs. Louis V. Ledoux, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Mansfield, and Miss Lucy T. Aldrich; these, with one exception (an anonymous loan), are now the property of the Metropolitan Museum.

When one speaks about the differences between the minor arts and the decorative arts, and the major arts and the fine arts, one usually tends to relegate the robes and garments that human beings wear to the minor arts. If so, the Japanese have brought the art of design in the matter of dress to a very high level—so high indeed that one hesitates to call it a minor art at all. Today we would call our textile designers

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basically artists, intellectuals trained in colleges and universities, very different from the early unschooled weavers who worked in traditional idioms without changing them radically. Craft work is apt to have a certain sequence. The designer might make little circles and squares and do various things with them, and then put on leaves and try to draw flowers; that kind of thing has developed in many countries of the world, and especially in Japan. It has been rightly said that art and the technique of art are inseparable. We cannot have the one without the other. Techniques can be learned but art requires more than skill. The Stone Age man did not have to develop culture. On the other hand the very vitality in the message of President Eisenhower on the place of art in our society suggests the measure of modern man’s creative impulse, which we call art and by which we try to define in terms of beauty and ugliness the manifestations of man’s inner spirit as it relates to the external world. Each civilization, each movement has been reappraised by subsequent aestheticians and historians. It is true that a definition of beauty is needed that is independent of eras and influences. A definition of beauty defines ugliness as well as beauty—but beauty has been defined as an intangible essence of tangible things.

Henry Varnum Poor has written that “throughout the ages the rare and beautiful things . . . have been the expressions of whole people of a time and place more than of individuals.” This would seem to be true of the Japanese robes which we show in this exhibition.

Wood block triptych from about 1790, by Hosoda Yeishi (1756-1829) Gift of Samuel Isham, 1914
Four Hundred Winters . . . Four Hundred Springs . . .

by JEAN E. MAILEY  Assistant Curator of Far Eastern Art

The Japanese temperament has always expressed itself with particular sympathy in the art of costume, and the robes in our current exhibition are exquisitely apt adaptations of design and material to the requirements of various moods, occasions, seasons. Most of them were worn by rich and aristocratic women, from the last part of the Ashikaga period (1392-1572) through the Momoyama (1573-1603) and Tokugawa periods (1604-1868). In the Ashikaga and Momoyama examples especially they show the last stages of a long tradition of Chinese influence on aristocratic Japanese taste; in the Tokugawa group we can see the development of peculiarly Japanese taste, expressed in Japanese terms and techniques, for a large and wealthy middle class.

Most of the robes seen here are the richly decorated outer kimonos (uchikake), of either short- or long-sleeved cut (kosode or furisode), worn unbound over the regular kimono on ceremonial or important social occasions. A few robes worn in the No, a classical lyric drama dating back to the middle ages of Japan, are included from the collections of the Metropolitan Museum. Their decorative conventions and stiff heavy material, adapted to the formal projections of drama from a lighted stage, form an interesting contrast with the softer robes of ordinary life.

The screens, each with one or two robes folded over a garment rack against a gold-leaf background, were made up in Japan at the request of the collector, Shojiro Nomura, early in this

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