

TREASURE HOUSE FAIR

Collecting Japanese Textiles

By Çiğdem Baker

Kimono for a Young Girl 1912-1926
Courtesy of The Khalili Collection

Japan has long captivated the Western imagination with its approach to an exquisite kind of beauty, characterised by its delicacy and restraint. It is embodied in the principle of *kanso*, a cornerstone of Japanese aesthetics that finds beauty in simplicity and the art of subtraction. This permeates every facet of Japanese culture - from watercolour painting and ceramics to the choreography of their tea ceremonies and culinary presentation and nowhere is it more vividly expressed than in Japanese textiles and garments - particularly the kimono. Its clean, unadorned lines and elegance celebrate the natural qualities of its materials - whether the subtle sheen of silk or the muted tones of hand-dyed fabric, making the garments transcend mere functionality to become wearable art.

The history of the kimono reflects the blending of *kanso* with global influences. In the 16th century, Portuguese traders introduced silk fabrics that enriched Japanese craftsmanship, followed by the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch introduced a range of new materials that expanded the possibilities of kimono design, including wool, dyes and metallic threads that added subtle brilliance to ceremonial garments.

By the late 19th century, during the Meiji era, Japan began sharing its artistry with the world, most notably at the 1873 international exhibition in Vienna where kimonos as well as prints, lacquerware and ceramics, were introduced to international audiences.

The kimono's international debut captivated countless artists, from Monet and Van Gogh to Whistler and Klimt, who used it as an excuse for geometric abstract structure in their paintings. In modern times, pop culture icons such as David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, Madonna, and Björk have transformed the kimono into a dazzling emblem of style and artistic expression. Freddie Mercury, an avid collector, amassed over 50 exquisite vintage kimonos, including a richly embroidered stage-worn piece that commanded a breathtaking £57,150 at auction. The kimono's allure transcends the stage and canvas, shaping the costume design of the Star Wars saga and inspiring the avant-garde creations of Alexander McQueen.

For those entranced by the allure of Japanese textiles, the journey into collecting kimonos can be a scholarly journey. A good starting point is the acclaimed book *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*, created alongside the V&A's 2020 exhibition of the same name. This exhibition brilliantly traced the kimono's evolution from traditional attire to a contemporary fashion icon.

For those seeking a deeper dive, the Khalili Collection of Kimono offers an unparalleled exploration. Assembled by British-Iranian scholar, collector, and philanthropist Nasser D. Khalili, this extraordinary collection comprises over 450 garments and is widely regarded as one of the most significant in the world. To explore this treasure trove, visit khalilicollections.org.



Kimono for a Young Girl 1912-1926, The Khalili Collection

Image courtesy of The Khalili Collection

How then do you start a collection worth cherishing? Collecting kimonos comes with its challenges; without specialist knowledge, verifying the authenticity and the age of a kimono can be tricky. However, the cost is generally related to the age, material and craftsmanship of the kimono. As a rule of thumb, ceremonial kimonos are more expensive. For instance, museum-quality ceremonial kimonos are upwards of £2,000. For those interested in contemporary versions, the website Gallery Japan is well worth a visit. There you will find many breathtaking kimono designs by contemporary textile artists; many of whom are international exhibited and have won prestigious awards.

Laura Bordignon is a specialist antique dealer in Japanese works of art from the Meiji period 1868-1912. An expert in textiles and embroideries of the era, Laura says: "during the Meiji era the textile firms in Kyoto who previously mainly produced kimono and temples garments, underwent significant changes due to the modernisation policies of the new Meiji government. They started to cater for a Western export market manufacturing extremely fine ornamental textiles art for interiors such as silk embroidery pictures, screens, drapery and wall hangings which were imported through dealers and shops like Libertys in London. Silk pictures were often based on actual paintings but delicately embroidered with fine stitches techniques to create a great visual effect and also using layers and texture to create a sense of depth, which from a distance and to the untrained eye appear like paintings".

A fine example of this is a Japanese silk panel she is selling made in the Oshi-e technique depicting the Samurai Nitta Yoshisada.



Japanese silk panel made in the Oshi-e technique depicting the Samurai Nitta Yoshisada with his attendant kneeling at his side, late Meiji Period 1868-1912.

W: 58cm (22.8") H: 81cm (31.9")

Image courtesy of Laura Bordinon

Malcolm Fairley has been specialising in Japanese works of art for over 40 years and he played a critical role in creating the landmark catalogue for the **Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Japanese Art**, titled *Meiji no Takara: Treasures of Imperial Japan*.

One of his key pieces is a silk embroidery made by the company Takashimaya and first purchased (by repute) at the 1906 World's Fair in Milan. Made at the turn of the last century, it is decorated in a rich array of flowers including chrysanthemums, peonies, irises, hydrangea, wisteria, lilies and roses. Takashimaya was a company that commissioned famous Japanese artists to make designs which their company would produce as textiles, ready to market for the export market and a table cover like this, would have been luxurious items even in their day.

It would originally have had tassels or a fringe around the edges and hung over a table so that the floral embroidery would have been visible hanging down the sides. It is highly likely the table would have been used to display a vase and not used every day for eating on and its colours are still unusually vibrant.

Fairley says "we have been collecting textiles for over 30 years, but finding them in really fine condition is increasingly difficult. We do still occasionally find smaller framed embroideries, which are often great examples of their very finest work but comprehensive collections are rare".



Takashimaya - A fine silk embroidered table cover. 176 x 173 cm, mounted on a wood stretcher late Meiji Period (1868-1912).

Image courtesy of Malcolm Fairley