

Silk kimono, ca. 1930s.  
Ryerson FRC2013.03.005.  
Donated by R. Vanderpeer.



# THE LANGUAGE OF THE KIMONO

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Kimonos, long associated with the cultural fabric of Japan, have their own language. For example, 'Kimono o kiru' means 'I'm going to wear kimono.' Although this loose-fitting, T-shaped garment is worn by both men and women, and generally constructed out of lengths of a standard width fabric, every element of the garment serves to communicate aspects of the wearer's identity, including age, gender, class and even the formality of the occasion. The type and colour of fabric, the length of the sleeves, the presence or absence of crests, and the type of accessories worn with the kimono can all be read like texts.

In 2013, three silk kimonos were donated to the FRC, including this blue-gray silk kimono with padded hem and red silk lining (FRC2013.03.005). The donor indicated that these garments were acquired by her grandparents in the 1930s during a trip to Orient, but it is not known whether the kimonos were purchased to be worn as loungewear or to be kept as souvenirs. The donor was not aware of any associated obi or other accessories that would normally be worn with these garments. Kimonos were collectible items and some versions were made expressly for export to western markets (note 1).



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Textile detail. Donated by  
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The radiant colour and pattern of this plain weave silk furisode (long-sleeved) kimono is a signal of youth. As a woman aged, she was expected to wear more subdued colours and patterns would be confined to the hem (note 2). In this kimono, the pattern appears relatively high on the body and depicts a landscape scene with cranes, turtles, flowers, and cherry trees in blossom. Parts of the scene have been over-embroidered with silk thread or gold thread. The red silk lining is visible on the neckband (eri), at the hem and as the sleeves move. The hem is thickly padded (hikisuso). At one time, such padding was associated with "aristocratic ladies and high prostitutes of the Edo period," but is now often adopted for "the modern version of the traditional wedding ensemble" (note 3). The sleeve-length of a kimono is another element that is linked to gender and age, and these swinging sleeves are mid-length. They do not fall all the way to the ankle and this length is associated with a semi-full dress for unmarried women (note 4). The rounded corners of the sleeve are also markers associated with the garments of a single female.



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Sleeve detail. Donated by  
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The kimono body (mihada) is atypical in that it has a horizontal seam at mid-body where the patterned material has been attached to the blue-gray silk. There would not normally be a seam here as typically the garment would be shortened by folding the extra fabric under the obi (note 5). This seam suggests that its western owner shortened the kimono so that it could be worn without an obi. The inside lining also shows evidence of unpicked basting stitches would have been used during laundering of the kimono.

This beautiful kimono is rife with meaning. Intended for a young, unmarried woman perhaps for her pending nuptials, we will never know whether it was actually worn for that purpose. Nonetheless, it serves as a primer of kimono connoisseurship.

## **NOTES**

Note 1: Terry Satsuki Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, London: Reaktion Books, 2014, 234.

Note 2: Liza Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993: 196-197.

Note 3: *Ibid*: 92.

Note 4: *Ibid*: 167.

Note 5: Annie Van Assche, "Interweavings: Kimono Past and Present" in *Fashioning Kimono. Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*. London: V&A Publications, 2005.

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