

'Kimono' for the Western Market: Two Women/Two Kimono
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Abstract

With the opening of Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, the kimono took hold of the imagination of European couturiers and they were soon adopting its structural and decorative elements into their designs. Employing, in particular, the voluminous nature of kimono, couturiers promoted the liberating features of this 'exotic' garment in concert with dress reformists and an already steady movement in the west toward less constricting women's fashion. At the same time, the opening of the island nation to the world presented Japanese entrepreneurs with an ever-widening market. The opportunity to offer appealing merchandise to the western world was not lost on Japanese artisans or the business community. This paper will explore the acquisition of imported 'kimono' by two American women—Alice Jones Page (1861–1931) and Ella Stimson Cate (1865–1938). Based on their construction and accompanying narrow sash, both examples were made specifically for the western market.

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The Introduction of Kimono to Europe

The first Europeans known to enter Japan were the Portuguese in the early 1540s. They were soon followed by a stream of Jesuit missionaries and by the early seventeenth century, the Dutch arrived at Hirado, off the coast of Kyūshū. Granted trading rights, they established the Dutch East India Company.

Relegated by 1641 to the man-made island of Dejima in the bay off Nagasaki, the Japanese and the Dutch began a ritual, which solidified their trading partnership. The Dutch were allowed to visit the mainland on a single annual visit to renegotiate trading rights and exchange gifts with the shōgun. In return for their offerings, the Dutch often received padded silk kimono or *rocken*—a Dutch term for over-garments or gowns. And so, the kimono was introduced to Europe. The garments sent back to The Netherlands were welcomed as sumptuous, ample, and comfortable. Worn like a housecoat or dressing gown, *japonsche rock* were often the attire of choice in men's portraiture, accessorized with lace cravats, cuffs and full-bottomed wigs.

Endnote:1 The kimono was therefore divorced from its authentic use. Its simple T-shape and perceived nonchalant fullness was the antithesis of fashionable Western dress constructed to conform to the body's contours. The unstructured kimono was adopted by Westerners as a relaxed, less constricting garment.

The forced establishment of trade relations between the United States and Japan by Commodore Perry in 1854, facilitated similar treaties between the Japanese and other

European powers. Although some Asian decorative arts had been exported to Europe prior to Perry's visit, such as *rocken*, Perry's successful arbitration led to a greater proliferation of Japanese goods in Paris and London shops in the late 1850s. Such establishments were frequented by artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, James Tissot, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, among many others. These artists were fascinated by the peculiar aesthetic qualities of this new material and they used their collections and newfound fascination with Japan's aesthetics in their work. **Endnote:2**

The Use of Kimono in the West

By the 1870s, the familiarity with and admiration of Japanese motifs grew among couturiers, and therefore fashionable women, in Europe and the United States. The adoption of the kimono and its patterns became more pronounced. While no fashionable woman would dare wear a kimono outside the home in this period, japonese motifs were woven into dress fabrics by textile manufacturers or applied onto garments by couturiers and the kimono itself was adopted as comfortable at-home wear.



Left: Fig. 1. France, Textile, circa 1912, silk, ©Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute, AC8937 93-27-3, Photo by Richard Haughton



Right: Fig. 2. Jacques Doucet (1853–1929), France (Paris), Day Dress, circa 1897, wool, silk, enamel, metal, ©Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute, AC10426 2001-1-2 AB, Photo by Taishi Hirokawa



For instance, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's 1882 portrait of Madame Hériot in the Brooklyn Museum's collection depicts the sitter wearing a kimono belted over a stylish day dress. Or a woman might choose, as in this piece in the collection of The Kyoto Costume Institute, to purchase a kimono and have a dress made from its disassembled parts. Remade in the 1870s by court dressmakers in London, traces of the original kimono seams remain in this textile.

Fig. 3. *Misses Turner Court Dress Makers (active late 19th c.), England (London), Dress: Bodice and Overskirt, 1876–78, silk, metallic thread, ©Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute, AC8938 93-28-1 AB, Photo by Richard Haughton*

Japan's Response to Western Interest

As early as 1859, the eastern port city of Yokohama had quickly become a gateway for East/West exchange. The streets were lined with souvenir shops and export companies established by Japanese entrepreneurs. The opportunities in the ever-widening Western market were eagerly exploited. One such merchant was Shiino Shobei who founded the S. Shobey Silk Store the same year the Yokohama port opened. Although not much is known about the early years of his establishment, Shobey began by selling silks and became one of Yokohama's foremost merchants. Shortly after visiting the Vienna International Exposition of 1873, he began making and directly exporting high quality, handmade silk clothing and accessories targeting the Western market. His exports included at-home gowns or dressing robes.

Because they were less structured and looser in fit than bespoke Western dress, it was possible to manufacture these garments in Japan for direct export. Characterized by a loose princess cut with a modicum of fit at the waist, a center front opening, high neckline, long sleeves, and a slight train, they were constructed of vertically quilted silk, often with a contrasting color for the collar or lapels, cuffs and pockets, fancy cord closures and belts, and hand embroidery in twisted silk thread. The use of the plied thread was used specifically to allay Westerners' concern of what they perceived of as fragile silk floss—the traditional thread used by the Japanese. Robes such as these were advertised widely in European and American fashion magazines. Later examples were sold by Iida Takashimaya and were frequently featured in the Liberty & Co. catalog. In her essay in *The Elegant Other: Cross-cultural Encounters in Fashion and Art*, published in 2017, Suoh Tamami, curator at The Kyoto Costume Institute, details the construction of these garments. **Endnote:3**



Fig. 4. Japan, Dressing Gown, 1874–76, silk, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Russell S. Sims in memory of Margaret Minor Shaffer, 1989.13

Western Adoption of Kimono Elements

Although women's fashionable dress of the last decade of the nineteenth century was stiff and constrictive, at-home garments adopted progressively more comfortable forms often inspired by the kimono. In 1893, *Harper's Bazaar* published an advertisement for Japanese kimono to be worn as tea gowns or morning wrappers, accessorized with an embroidered and fringed obi or sash, made especially for the New York-based A.A. Vantine & Co. **Endnote:4** Advertisements and fashion articles featuring kimono-inspired wrappers, bath robes, tea gowns, dressing gowns, or invalid wraps for both women and men appeared frequently in many periodicals. In 1896 *The Maine Farmer and Journal of the Useful Arts* published an article titled "The Kimono and How to Make It." The column described the garment's advantages stating, "It is comfortable beyond compare to slip on, over the nightdress if necessary, . . . It is chic looking . . . and if you are ever the owner of one of these kimonos you will come to regard life as a failure without one or more always in stock." **Endnote:5** Clearly by the mid-1890s even a woman in rural Maine might be convinced that a kimono was a useful and fashionable garment that one should never be without. Described as "distinctly suggestive of home comfort" and "a recognized and deserved favorite of womankind," the kimono was generally approved of as a comfortable necessity in a woman's wardrobe. **Endnote:6**

As the twentieth century dawned, these relaxed forms of dress based on the kimono continued to be modified and adapted to fashionable Western trends. Short jackets with lapels, shaped sleeves with turned back cuffs and gathering at the shoulders, fronts and backs gathered to dropped yokes, and full length gowns with bell sleeves and lace trim were all called 'kimono' or some Western derivation of the word. The traditional Japanese kimono was transmogrified into a garment that had only a minimal connection with its traditional form.

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Fig. 5. J. Bacon & Sons, Inc. Advertisement, Christian Observer, 1905 (Public Domain)

Alice Page's 'Kimono'

The exotic nature of the kimono held its cachet in the West through the 1920s when liberation from the corset was paired with fashionable dress that was routinely loose and comfortable—its construction based in large part on the kimono. The allure of the traditional garment attracted the widowed Alice Jones Page in the early 1920s when she traveled to Europe and Asia, including Japan. The probable result was the purchase of a 'kimono.'



Left: Fig. 6. Japan, Kimono and Sash, circa 1923, silk, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift in memory of Mrs. William Leo Doepke (Ethel Page) by her granddaughter, Sara Doepke, 2012.95a-b (back view)

Right: Fig. 7. Japan, Kimono and Sash, circa 1923, silk, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift in memory of Mrs. William Leo Doepke (Ethel Page) by her granddaughter, Sara Doepke, 2012.95a-b (front view)



Woven in silk crepe with a black on black damask in a floral design, this example is lined with bright yellow silk and embroidered using twisted silk thread. It looks every inch the traditional garment, but there are subtle differences. Cut in the traditional T-form, the back is a single width of cloth in contrast to the narrow widths of fabric from which traditional kimono were made. The total length is shortened when compared to traditional garments, and Page's kimono is accessorized with a soft fringed sash that simulates the obi when wrapped around the waist. This exact garment with the fringed sash is seen in this 1914 advertisement in *Vogue* magazine. **Endnote:7**

Fig. 8. Elizabeth Allen Advertisement, *Vogue*, April 1, 1915 (Public Domain)

The skirt has also been widened with godets set in the side seams—an accommodation that allowed for a wider stride than traditionally wrapped kimono. **Endnote:8** Most striking, perhaps, is the employment of the American Beauty-style roses embroidered on this traditional form, using the same twisted thread as was used on the 1870s robe. Demonstrating the intersection of East/West aesthetics, it is clear that the makers adopted these flowers as motifs to appeal to Western sensibilities and Page responded to the enticement.

Like 1870s quilted dressing gowns, kimono like this black and yellow example were manufactured in the early twentieth century and exported from Yokohama. They were sold by retail establishments such as Takashimaya and featured in various other catalogs for the wholesale market. This unlabeled kimono from Alice Page was probably purchased on her Asian travels, but it must be noted that by 1910 similar items were flooding the American market from both Japanese and Western manufacturers and available for purchase from any number of outlets. In addition, Page's daughter Ethel married William Leo Doepke in 1910, heir to the massive Alms and Doepke Dry Goods Company headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio. Like many concerns of its type, this retailer imported items from Asia and various styles of kimono were often featured in their advertisements from the early twentieth century.

Ella Stimson Cate's 'Kimono'

Much like Alice Page, the allure of Japan was too much to resist for Ella Stimson. Born in Massachusetts, Stimson was courted by Wallace Cate, an ordained minister living in Japan from 1890 to 1897, where he served the Universalist Japanese Mission. Ella joined Wallace in Japan in 1891, where they were married and began their family.



Fig. 9. *Ella Stimson (left), Isaac Wallace Cate (right) and family, circa 1902, Cate Family Papers, ©Vermont Historical Society*

After Wallace Cate's death in 1908, Ella eventually returned to the United States after a round-the-world tour. For nearly two years in the late 1920s, Ella and her son Philip Harding Cate operated The Oriental Shop in Nashua, New Hampshire, through which they imported and sold Asian merchandise. Located in the south of the state near the Massachusetts border, Nashua was then a thriving city connected to the larger metropolis of Boston by a trolley system.

As early as September 1926, while still living in Japan, Ella Stimson Cate seems to have been acting as a wholesaler of Asian goods for various small curio shops in the United States, based on personal correspondence held in the collection of the Vermont History Center. A 1927 letter from her daughter Esther mentions that Mary Canfield, proprietor of the Woodstock Craft Shop in the state of Vermont, informed her that, "the goods have arrived and all are 'nice things'." Esther goes on to discuss starting a business with her mother once Ella returns home, selling Asian objects, providing interior decorating services and suggesting that perhaps millinery would be a good addition to the business. Later that year, Esther relates that Mrs. Canfield could sell "the bright colored silk kimonos" quickly—an encouraging sign for their possible business, listing pongee dresses, combs, leather and silk card cases, lacquer boxes, and pearls as other items that were being wholesaled to businesses in the area.

By February of 1928, Ella began to ship merchandise to Nashua for her own shop. Lengths of silk crepe dress fabrics were shipped from N. Yamamoto Shoten in Yokohama, followed by cotton crepe kimono, silk crepe scarves, brocaded happi coats, and ladies' pajamas from an exporter in Kobe. At the same time, the Cates were also corresponding with wholesalers based in Massachusetts, New York and Ohio, ordering a wide variety of Asian-style products such as brass gongs and incense burners, calendars, letter openers, and travel kits. Although the venture seemed promising, financial ledgers indicate the shop struggled from the beginning and closed in 1929. The closure of Cate's Oriental Store at the end of the decade should come as no surprise. By the beginning of the 1930s, the Western world's fascination with Japonism waned, not to be revived until the 1960s. **Endnote:9**

Perhaps a survivor of The Oriental Shop, and similarly made in Japan for the Western market, is this bright red kimono in the collection of the Newark Museum acquired from Ella Cate's daughter-in-law. Constructed similarly to a traditional kimono, without side godets, this piece is printed and stenciled with a variety of traditional flowers and butterflies and accessorized with a

narrow sash, much like Alice Page's kimono. Whether purchased as a dressing gown to be worn by one of the Cate family members or as merchandise for The Oriental Shop, Ella Cate, as well as Alice Page, succumbed to the allure of Japonism.



Fig. 10. Japan, Dressing Gown with Floral Motifs, before 1929, silk, H: 59 in, W: 51.25 x 26.25 in, Newark Museum, Purchase, 1929, Collection of the Newark Museum 29.3A,B

Conclusion

The kimono owned by Ella Stimson Cate and Alice Jones Page, now in museum collections, chart a fascination with Japanese style that began with the Dutch in the early seventeenth century and continued in the West in the nineteenth century with artists, couturiers, textile manufacturers, and fashionable women through the 1920s. The West adopted the kimono wholeheartedly by the mid-nineteenth century, styling and bending its traditional form to its own concept of what it envisioned kimono to be, adopting and transposing those elements that fit into their design lexicon. By the 1870s when the Japanese royal family was insisting on wearing Western dress at court, European and American women were conversely embracing the kimono. Its voluminous T-shape became a relaxed, unstructured form of dress in the hands of Westerners, while it became more constricting and formal in Japan. Its elemental traits influenced Western couturiers just as it had artists and the term 'kimono' remains synonymous with looseness and ease even today, continuing to influence contemporary designers in the twenty-first century.

Sources

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Endnotes

- 1 Breukink-Peeze. 1989. 54-55.
- 2 Ono. 2003. 94-98.
- 3 Suoh. 2017.187-188; Thieme. 1993. 49, 51.
- 4 *Harper's Bazaar* 25, no. 45: 934.
- 5 *Maine Farmer and Journal of the Useful Arts* 65, no.9: 3.
- 6 *Christian Observer*, 1905
- 7 *Vogue* 45, no. 7: 122.
- 8 Suoh. 2017.188-189.
- 9 ———. *Cate Family Papers, 1864–1978*. Leahy Library, Vermont Historical Society.

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