The kimono, the national dress of Japan, is quintessentially Japanese. It is a loose-fitting garment with a straight, cylindrical silhouette, allowing one to appreciate the form (and beauty) of the human body allusively, rather than literally. The 150 kimono in the Montgomery Collection (published herein) date roughly from the 1860s to the early 1950s—the last few years of the Edo period, all of the Meiji and Taishō periods, and the first twenty-five years of the Shōwa period. The collection is comprehensive in that it includes kimono (and haori jackets) worn by men, women, and children for formal, ceremonial, and casual use. To fully appreciate the significance of this extraordinary collection, it is helpful to understand the society and culture from which these garments came. "Clothing is a cultural system," as the anthropologist Liza Dalby states in her book, *Kimono*:

> . . . Clothing carries messages that reflect its society and era. Like language, clothing reacts to changed social conditions by incorporating new elements, shifting forms, or slogging off old styles into obsolescence. The capacity of clothing to convey information is enormous. Its messages are silently and efficiently broadcast to other members of society, who are all equipped by cultural knowledge to read its codes at a glance. . . . kimono are coded for messages, regarding age, gender, season, formality, and occasion [as well as] wealth and taste.[1]

The Kimono Form

The kimono is a one-piece, front-wrap garment with a rectangular form (figs. 1–2). The same pattern (i.e., cut) is used for both men's and women's kimono, and has remained so for many millennia. It is constructed with a minimum of cutting from a single bolt of fabric measuring approximately 12 meters long (13.5 yards) and 40 centimeters wide (15.75 inches), and all of the fabric is used. Two long, continuous panels—slightly more than four times the height of the person in length—make up the body of the kimono. These two panels wrap the body, vertically, from the floor, up the front, over the shoulders, and down the back. The kimono has no shoulder seams.

The sleeves are made of two more panels, and attached to the body of the robe at the shoulders. Two half-width panels are added to the front panels, allowing for the front to wrap, and a long lapel is attached to the neck and front sections. When worn, the kimono is wrapped left side over right and held closed by an obi sash, which is wrapped several times around the person's mid-section. The length of the kimono can be easily altered by drawing up the excess fabric, folding it over, and tying it with a cord, then tucking it under the obi sash. A taller person folds less; a shorter person folds more. The same amount of fabric is basically used for both formal and casual kimono.

The kimono is well suited for Japan's semitropical climate and its culture. Its loose, open sleeves allow air to pass through. The wrap style allows for ease in movement, from sitting on the floor to

[1] *Liza Dalby,* The Kimono, *p. 7.*

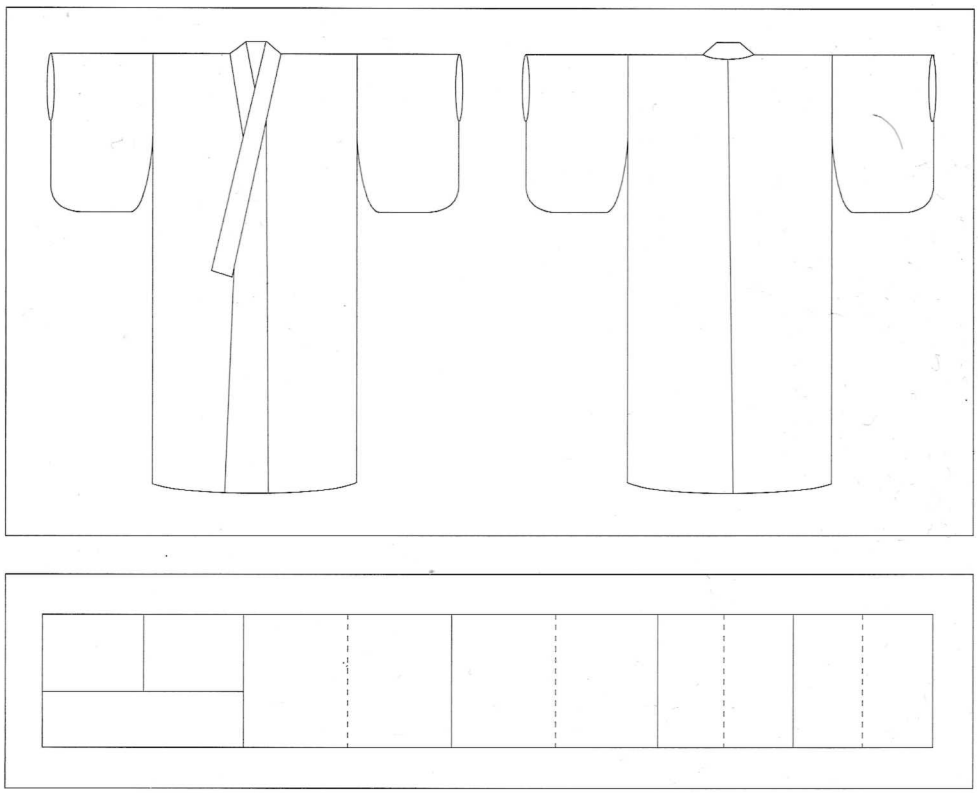


Fig. 1
Kimono front and back.

Fig. 2
Kimono pattern.

standing. A lined kimono is worn in colder weather, and a summer kimono is unlined. Several kimono can be worn layered for added warmth. A cord passed through the sleeve openings and tied at the back will keep the sleeves out of harms way while working.

Early Kimono Prototypes

The kimono evolved from one of two formal Chinese court robes adopted by Japan in the seventh century. These robes were called *agekubi* (high-neck) and *tarikubi* (front wrap neck) in Japan, and as in China, they were worn exclusively by the nobility (figs. 3–4).[2] Initially, men wore the *agekubi*-style robe, while women wore the *tarikubi* robe. In time, the *agekubi* robe became a purely ceremonial dress, worn by men for formal functions pertaining to the imperial court. And it is still worn by members of the court today.

After several minor transformations, the *tarikubi* evolved into a distinctively Japanese robe during the Heian period, when it was worn by court nobles. At this time, women of the court customarily wore robes in twelve layers (*jūni-hitoe*), over which they wore an excessively long divided skirt (*hakama*). A *tarikubi*-like robe made up the inner layers in this configuration. These inner robes eventually came to be worn on the outside in the subsequent Kamakura period, and they were called *kosode* (small sleeve opening).[3] In the beginning, very few gender distinctions existed between the *kosode* robes worn by men and those worn by women (fig. 5).[4] Commoners also began to wear a simple one-piece *kosode*-like robe during this time, but these were made of plant fibers, not silk.

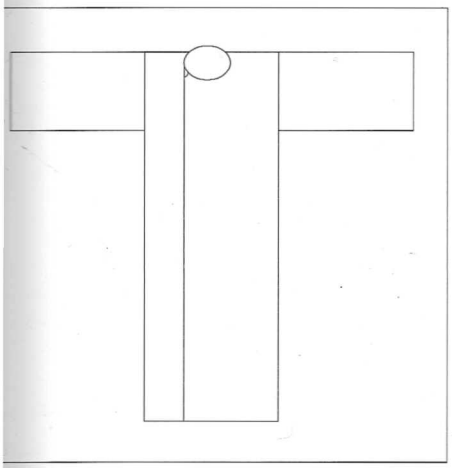
This reference to the robe's sleeve is a crucial element in the history of the kimono form. While the body remained constant, sleeve styles changed, and the terms to describe them varied: *kosode* (small sleeve opening); *ōsode* (large sleeve opening); *hirosobe* (wide sleeve); and *furisode* (long swinging sleeve). Of these four terms, only *furisode* remains in circulation today—some eight centuries later. Although hardly the norm today, the *furisode* is worn by girls or young single women for celebratory occasions, such as Girl's Day (March 3rd), birthdays (especially the third, fifth, and seventh), graduation from high school, and for New Years Day.

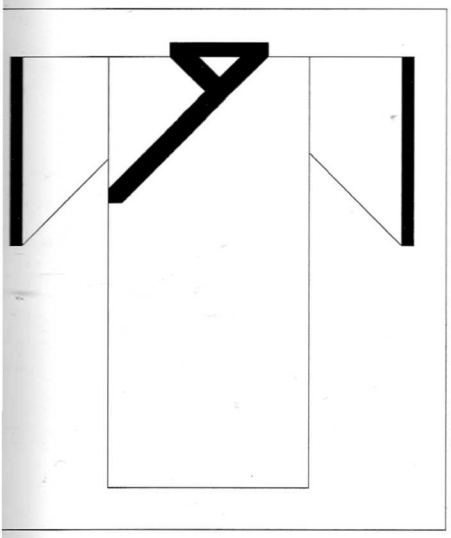
2. *Seiroku Noma,* Japanese Costume and Textile Art, *pp. 10–11.*
3. *Seiroku, p. 13.*
4. *Seiroku, p. 36.*
5. *Inumaru Tadashi,* The Traditional Crafts of Japan, *"Textiles I, Weaving," p. 5.*

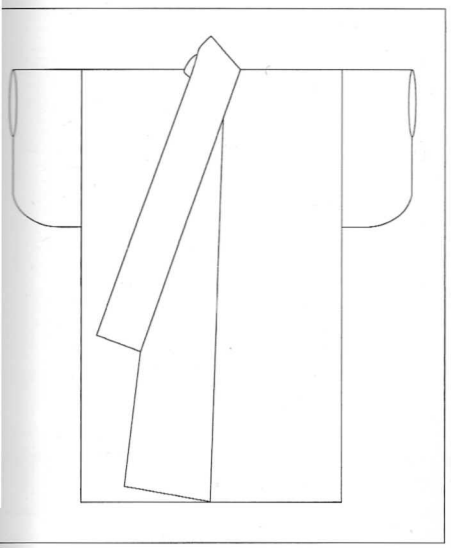
g. 3
ekubi (high neck) robe.

g. 4
ikubi (front wrap neck) robe.

g. 5
sode (small sleeve) robe.







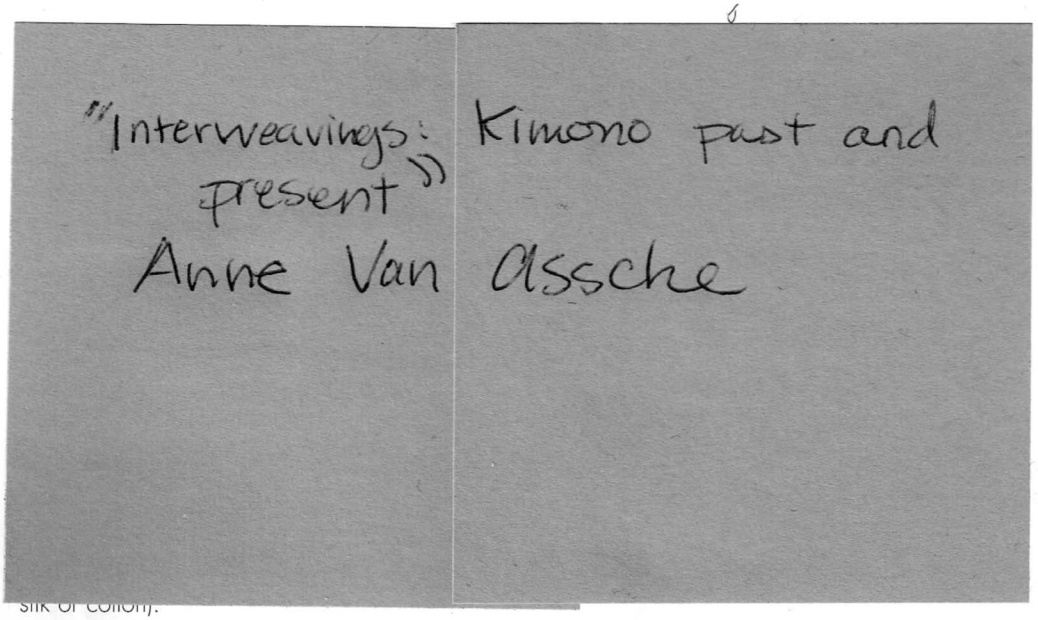
The *kosode* had a long and dynamic life that lasted approximately 600 years. It was the dominant dress of Japan until the Meiji period, when the general term "kimono" (thing to wear) replaced "*kosode*." The physical difference between the kimono and the *kosode* has mainly to do with sleeves. The *kosode* has smaller sleeve openings, and the part of the sleeve below the arm opening is attached to the body of the robe. In the Meiji period, sleeves were freed from the robe's body, allowing a wider obi sash to be worn, as well as more ease in movement.

Silk

At the heart of Japan's kimono culture is silk, an ancient material interwoven into numerous legends in Asia. It is strong and lustrous, it accepts dyes very easily, and it has a great variety of applications. Sericulture, the art of raising silk worms and producing silk, was introduced to Japan by Chinese and Korean artisans during the third century.[5] Silk is a strong, lustrous protein fiber created by the larvae, or silk worm (*kaiko*), of the *Bombyx mori* moth (originally a native of northern China). At one time, as many as 200 varieties of silk worms were cultivated in Japan, resulting in silk fibers that varied in both thickness and color (snow-white, yellow, orange, pink, green, and blue). The silk worm only eats the leaves of the mulberry shrub, and while spinning its cocoon, it has a voracious appetite and eats twenty-four hours a day. The silk worm builds the shell of its cocoon with a natural filament thread excreted from its mouth. It spins this thread in layers around itself to form the cocoon, building up a thick wall. All is held together with sericin, a substance that the worm excretes from its mouth along with the filament. When the worm leaves the cocoon, it is a caterpillar, soon to develop into a moth.

Filament silk is processed by boiling the cocoon to wash away the sericin gum and impurities. The filament is then pulled (or reeled) from the cocoon in a long, continuous strand. For garment silk, several strands of filament are plied together, while single strands are used in musical instruments, such as the Japanese *shamisen*.

A second type of silk, which goes by several names—floss silk, raw silk, dupion, and pongee—is obtained from defective cocoons, that is, those which did not develop properly. After the cocoons are boiled with a caustic material (such as sodium bicarbonate) to remove the sericin, they are spread open from the center to form a fibrous cylinder of batting. This batting (*mawata*) is placed on a swift and spun into a thread. Fabric woven with this silk (*tsumugi*) has a nubby, dull surface texture, unlike the shiny, smooth fabric produced from reeled filament silk.



silk or cotton).