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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Dressed by Nature, Adorned by Design: Seeing and reading the Seasons with Kimono

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Abstract: Various studies of Japanese arts and crafts have brought evidence that objects designed in Japan materially and aesthetically reflect the characteristics of the country's climate and its people's appreciation of nature. The kimono is no exception, with numerous demonstrations showing that in its very conception, modes of production as well as in the way it is coloured and patterned, Japanese nature is present, through a literal or symbolical connection with the seasons. By looking at specific modes of kimono production as well as pattern designs that match the iconic "four seasons of Japan", artistic inspirations and newly "imported" seasons, this article proposes to visually survey the different ways seasons are harmoniously or at times paradoxically expressed in kimono design. In addition, poems and passages from novels that have a connection with kimono will be examined, furthering the deep connections between design, Japanese culture and the life of the people who are "seasoning the seasons" in and with kimono.

Keywords: *Kimono design; Kimono patterns; Japanese culture; Japanese Aesthetics; Seasons.*

As analysed in studies of Japanese arts and crafts, the objects designed in Japan reflect the characteristics of the country's indigenous climate and unique landmarks as well as the people's cultural, at times emotional, sense of nature (Asquith & Kalland, 1997; Matsuoka & Noble, 2020; Shirane, 2013).

In particular, Watsuji Tetsurō — following the argument that says things are determined materially, symbolically and aesthetically because of the specific time and place they are created in — highlighted how systematically and intricately nature/climate or *fūdo* (風土) intersect with human experiences, objects and arts:

> *"The relationship between weather and vegetation can be transferred to the description of men's minds and hearts. […] [Why Japanese] still cling as fondly as ever to their kimono, their rice and their tatami is grounded in the reason that these are capable of expressing best of all changes of mood and temper that correspond to the seasons or to morning and evening."* (1961, pp. 201-02)

A statement mirrored by Anesaki Masaharu, who phrased the following:

> *"[Japanese live] too close to nature to antagonize [it] […] Just as art has permeated every corner of life in Japan, […] Japanese art always derives its model and inspiration from nature. […] Life varies according to the varying seasons, and the Japanese derives the artistic enjoyment which [they] find an essential part of life from [their] ability to respond to nature's suggestions and inspirations."* (1974 [1932], pp. 6-7)

Focusing on the makers' physical appreciation of the material destined to be used for their crafts, Christine Guth notes that nature is dynamically and systematically intertwined in any creative process:

> *"To give form to the myriad varieties of crafts […], makers joined forces and worked with nature. […] Craft makers understood the consequences of their actions in and on the natural world, because they had to work with the resources available to them and readjust their practice when circumstances changed. They were sensitive to the transformative and generative powers of their chosen materials and how to put these to best use with suitable tools and technologies. […] Through extended training […] markers brought to their practice dexterous, rhythmic movements and a highly developed sensitivity to the potentialities of materials. This reservoir of embodied knowledge did not lend itself readily to verbal translation. Practitioners learned by feeling their way with and through wood, clay, cotton and silk. Making, whatever its specificities, was thus a sensate experience involving both mind and body."* (2021, pp. 194-95)

The study of kimono brings various evidence demonstrating a profound understanding of the above positions and considerations. Japanese nature is indeed present in the very conception and modes of production of kimono as well as in the way kimono is adorned. More precisely, a kimono in its physical, practical, and cultural aspects, signals nature in multiple ways. There is an organic integration of nature in the kimono's "system" that can be seen through the way fibers (silk or plant based) are harvested and woven, and through the attention paid to patterns (level of finesse in the details, overall placement, size and colour palette). On this specific side of the system, an intricate network of visual references can be found, with a multitude of associations of iconic plants, flowers, animals and landscape which as a result create an appealing atmosphere, a wearable decor that engages the body in a multi-sensory manner (visual sense, smell, touch) as well as memories.

Dressing in kimono thus leads to the idea of embracing a mode of dress that displays "time passing by" in a multilayered manner. In other words, the way a kimono is made, from fibers to patterns, demonstrates a deep sensitivity to nature and nature-made material, to how flowers, foliage and plants grace the world. By concomitance, dressing in a kimono hints at how elegantly human beings can inhabit their reality, season after season.

By looking at specific modes of kimono production as well as pattern designs that match the iconic "four seasons of Japan", artistic inspirations and newly "imported" seasons, this article proposes to visually survey the different ways seasons are harmoniously or at times paradoxically expressed in kimono design. In addition, poems and passages from novels that have a connection with kimono will be examined, furthering the deep connections between design, Japanese culture and the life of the people who are "seasoning the seasons" in and with kimono. The navigation within this multimodal network of references will be twofold: firstly, it looks at the creation and practice of kimono and how this side of the culture surrounding this specific garment highlights general ideas of *Japaneseness*. Secondly, it looks at the patterns themselves and how they reflect a certain playful take on how to present seasonal markers and seasonal changes.

Part 1: Seasons and kimono: curated *Japaneseness*

1.1 Seasonal modes of creation

Looking at kimono production and the connection between human techniques and nature, a deep and broad level of intertwined forces quickly becomes evident. Firstly, seasons can be noted to influence the cultivation of silkworms and cocoons, the harvesting the fibers and dyeing plants (Van Assche, 2005) as well as the timing in building up dyeing material, such as the *sukumo* (*藍*) or fermented leaves that serve as a base for indigo dyeing vats (Iwano & Schalkoff, 2015, pp. 154-55; Tsujioka *et al.*, 2022, p. 9; Vejar & Rodriguez, 2020, p. 100).

The weaving process is equally impacted by the seasons, with local reports that highlight how time sensitive it is to create kimono fabrics such as *Bashōfu* (*芭蕉布*) or textile make of banana tree fiber in Okinawa. Traditionally, the harvests happen twice a year in spring (February-March) and in autumn (late September to October) (Hendrickx, 2007, p. 216). There are also several accounts that note how the material gathered in autumn gives harder fibers than the ones in spring (Nomura *et al.*, 2017, p. 318). In the Northern regions, acute awareness of seasonal timing appears in the production of *Echigo Jōfu/Ojiya Chijimi* (*越後上布 / 小千谷縮*) textiles, that are woven in the winter and later on blanched over snow (Figure 1)(Nitanai, 2017, p. 152).

Figure 1. Snow Bleaching (yuki sarashi) of Echigo Jōfu bolts of fabric. Photo: courtesy of Echigo Jōfu and Ojiya Chijimi Technical Preservation Association, Minamiuonuma and Kyoto Women's University (Kyoto Women's University Lifestyle Design Laboratory, 2024) .

The *yuki sarashi* (*雪晒し*) or blanching / bleaching fabric using snow and sunshine is an essential process that does not only "completes" the treatment of the original bolt of fabric but also preserves the kimono over time, when the whole process is repeated regularly afterwards. A slow-paced, patient method showcased in Kawabata Yasunari's novel *Snow Country*: throughout the story, the main character Shimamura periodically goes to the mountains of Yuzawa, Niigata prefecture, for a "cleansing retreat" into the snow, either for himself or for his collection of kimono. Doing so, he meshes the practical and the sentimental together as he reconnects with the land of his valued kimono and his precious relationship with a Komako, a geisha who lives there all year round. As is seen in the following passage:

> *"The thread was spun in the snow, and the cloth woven in the snow, washed in the snow and bleached in the snow. Everything, from the first spinning of the thread to the last finishing touches, was done in the snow. […] The Chijimi grass-linen of this snow country was the handwork of the mountain maiden through the long, snowbound winters.[…] The girls learned to weave as children, and they turned out their best work between the ages of of perhaps fourteen and twenty-four. […] They put their whole labor and love into this product of the long snowbound months […] between October […] when the spinning began, and mid-February of the following year, when the last bleaching was finished. [Shimamura always felt it was a lot of trouble to send his kimonos for bleaching] but when he considered the labors of those mountain maidens, he wanted the bleaching to be done properly in the country where the maidens had lived. The thought of the white linen, spread out on the deep snow, the cloth and the snow glowing scarlet in the rising sun, was enough*

> *to make him feel that the dirt of the summer had been washed away, even that he himself hand been bleached clean."* (Kawabata & Seidensticker, 2022 [1957/1937], pp. 150-52)

Another literary reference to the "snow made" *Echigo Jōfu* is in Hayashi Mariko's *Kimono o meguru monogatari* (*きものをめぐる物語*, Stories about Kimono), with the short story *Orihimesama* (*織り姫さま*) "The weaving princess", where the feeling of the seasons is also expressed strongly. The fibers and the cold temperatures both interpellate and condition the presence and "*raison d'être*" of Hide, the main weaver described in the story:

> *"The carefully nurtured hemp is cut in the summer and laid in fresh water. Eventually, the skin is peeled off and only the inner fibers are removed and dried. [...] The hemp fibers are separated with fingernails and moistened with the tongue to make fine threads, a process that takes an amazing amount of time. [...] It overall takes three months, as the season shifts from autumn to winter. [...] The threads are brought to the weavers in rounds, from when the snow is knee-deep until the New Year's greetings season. [...] Echigo Jofu hates dryness more than anything else. If it is not woven in the humidity brought by the snow, the fine threads can easily break. Hide's room faces south, close to the entrance. [...] During the winter, [...] it is so cold that if you stay in the room for five minutes, the tips of your fingers and toes get numb. [...] White and cold, it is the kind of room where monks live to meditate."* (Hayashi, 1997, pp. 147-53)

Another prime example can be found with the *yūzen nagashi* (*友禅流し*) or river washing of *yūzen* fabrics, as it used to be practiced in Kyōto by placing the bolt of dyed cloth into the flow of Kamo and Katsura rivers (Figure 2) (Brown, 1994[1]

Figure 2. Kyōto artisans cleansing Yuzen bolts of fabrics (*yūzen nagashi*) (1970's). Photo: courtesy of Ritsumeikan University - ARC (Art Research Center 立命館大学アート・リサーチセンター, 2024)

[1] More precisely: in 1902 (Meiji 35) the river washing was moved from the Horikawa canal the Kamogawa and Katsuragawa. The practice was gradually stopped from the mid-50s (Shōwa 30) and has been completely banned in 1970 (Shōwa 46) due to the pollution brought by the chemical dyes Senshoku Alpha Magazine. (2002). Kükikan o haramu nung o someru / tekusutgiruwaky no tenkai / Shizenkai no somoku de iomery orimono no inodori 空気感を孕む布を染める/テキスタイルワークの展開/自然界の草木で染める織物の彩り［Dyeing fabrics with air / Development of textile work / Colouring of textiles with natural dyeing material]. *Senshoku Alpha Magazine*.

With the different practices described above, it can thus be said that the kimono, in its very conception, is deeply connected to the qualities brought by the seasons and local specificities. This can serve as a reminder of how important it is to go beyond the discourse of "Japan has four seasons" and interrogate the nationalistic views that can be attached to such curated, repeated image. Japan has many seasonal variations, with different features that differ, from North to South, East to West, from mountains to valleys. Japan is very similar to other countries that also happen to mark their distinctive seasons clearly in their language and dress culture, such as Indonesia and Batik fabrics (Puryanti *et al.*, 2019; Saddhono *et al.*, 2014).

1.2 Kimono's seasonal practice

Besides modes of production, the presence of nature and seasons in kimono culture can be noted in the cyclical changes inherent in the practice of dressing in kimono. The most evident proof of this is seen in the tailoring and the way a kimono can be padded, made with thicker lining or made thinner. For instance, with *awase* (*袷* lined kimono), one can enjoy an outfit that would be appropriate from October until May, accommodating the cool outside temperatures. With *hitoe* (*単衣* unlined kimono) it is the lightness of the fabric that is appreciated, especially during the warm months that spread from June to September. The transition into *yukata* (*浴衣* unlined kimono made of light cotton) or semi-transparent summer kimono made of *ro* (*絽*) or *sha* (*紗*) "breathable" weave, usually happens while the hot and humid days of August linger over the country. The *nagajuban* (*長襦袢*) or underkimono has seasonal variations too, with warm materials such as silk or polyester used from October to May, thinner fabrics such as *ro* or *sha* from June to September, and actually nothing underneath the cotton *yukata*.

This system reinforces how kimono fashion does not rely on changing the shape of the garment nor on having variation in the length of the sleeves. The skirt part is always tailored as a long cylindrical wrap, and it is never shortened either, unlike the modulations seen in Western modes of dress. Put differently, it is just the tailoring, the weaving (and whether there is lining or not) that makes a kimono appropriate for cold or warm months, not the length of fabric covering the body. Personal adjustments — using cords to shorten the skirt part and blouse it around the hips or tuck the sleeves close to the shoulders — to accommodate with certain tasks or movements, are allowed but a kimono will never dramatically have "cuts" in the sleeve or skirt length, as seen in Western shirts, pants or jackets.

On top of this, the feel of the seasons is made obvious with specific "care rituals" such as the seasonal airing out of one's collection of outfits all at once, known as *mushi boshi* (*虫干し*) and the rotation of outfits inside one's wardrobe known as *koromogae* (*衣替え*). The airing is indeed very important, as trapped moisture can lead to mold growth and stains, eventually causing the ruin of the kimono. Overall, having a collection of well cared for kimono to be used alternatively around the year, for several years, can be seen as a highly regarded standard, as suggested by Ariyoshi Sawako in her novel *The River Ki* through the main character of Hana. The point is particularly stressed when Hana prepares the collection of kimono for her daughter Fumio before her wedding:

> *"Hana had not been able to order a dowry as elaborate as her own. Nonetheless, she felt that the least she could do was to order all the kimonos her daughter would ever need for both daily wear and formal occasions. She had several outfits made for each of the four seasons and the would last for the next twenty years, even if Fumio did not look after them properly."* (Ariyoshi, 2004 [1961], p. 146).

These attitudes and considerations were kept alive for generations until the 1950s but have been dying out since then. This is a phenomenon that got to be called *kimono banare* (*着物離れ* separation from kimono) (Valk, 2018, 2021) but still, for some, the kimono continues to be seen as a living asset in one's household. As often highlighted in portraits of kimono wearers, such as the ones interviewed by Sheila Cliffe for her research on kimono communities outside Japan (Cliffe, 2013) as well as the ones photographed by Todd Fong for the Kimono Closet project (Jamieson, 2018)[2] and the kimono can be an integral member of one's life, even when it is just "sleeping in the chest of drawers" (*箪笥に眠る着物 tansu ni nemuru kimono*), it is handled and regularly scrutinized.

In contemporary Japan, it could be argued that it is the world of *chanoyu* (*茶湯*) or tea ceremony — which inherently has a large community of kimono wearers — that perpetuates one of the most intricate way to accent seasonality with kimono. The tea practice calendar is filled with events that follow a specific timeline, such as *Hatsugama* (*初釜*) the first tea after New Year's, *Rikyūki* (*利休忌*) in late March which marks the passing and mourning of tea master Sen no Rikyū, or *Kuchikiri* (*口切*) the changing of brasier, in November. Donning a kimono according to each event is naturally key and numerous books give advices on how to dress in the appropriate kimono for the appropriate "tea season" (Chiba, 2022; Ichida, 2017). Most of these references are, one way or another, accenting the idea that drinking *matcha* tea is touching one of the cores of being Japanese, and the kimono helps expressing as truly or as directly as possible the *kokoro* (*心*) or heart/essence of the tea's spiritual practice. Kitami Masako in particular highlights how the kimono is to be experienced in movement, as a helper for the tea experience:

> *"In tea practice and training, you will actually stand, sit, and perform the temae procedures dressed in kimono. By going through these motions, you can experience the comfort of kimono more than just wearing it. I think it is wonderful to experience Japanese culture, to feel the seasons, and to have such feelings come naturally."* (Kitami, 2018, p. 6)

The practice of tea, as showcased in the above listed books, is therefore presented as a set of actions that enhance, and in the meantime reflect, the importance to perform a guided/curated femininity, inscribed within a vision of Japaneseness embedded in prim and proper actions. Comprised in such circumstances, it can be said that it is a Japaneseness based on harmony with one's surroundings, with the rules and the performativity of doing things correctly, for one's own sake as well as the sake of *omotenashi* (*おもてなし*) hospitality and transmission.

Related to this idea of preserving seasons with traditions, the way Geisha — or *Geiko*, as they are called in Kyōto — and the way the Geisha apprentices — or *Maiko* — dress themselves can be a good example to analyze. Similar to tea practitioners, they always don attires closely related to seasons, from the kimono to the *obi* sash, from the hairdos to the hair accessories. Everything in a Maiko or a Geiko's outfit indeed speak of their appreciation of time passing, although it is not done through a personal nomenclature but rather a social one, displaying the taste of someone who follows and respects the rules, and nodding to the cultural game that the seasons engage people into. As described by Lesley Downer:

> *"For a geisha, the art of choosing and wearing a kimono is as important a part of her training as learning traditional dancing or studying the shamisen. The kimono is an art form in its own right, as subtle and complex as tea ceremony, flower arrangement, or brush painting. […] Traditional arts in Japan are to do not with expressing oneself but learning the form, the kata, the proper way of doing things. The aim is perfection, a perfect promulgation of tradition, the right kimono worn*

[2] For more pictures, see the official Kimono Closet 箪笥開き箪笥開き, T. K. C. (2025). Kimono Closet. Real stories of Japanese women and the kimono they wer. *Facebook Profile (online)*. https://www.facebook.com/thekimonocloset/

> *the right way for the place, the season, and the occasion. [Thus] a geisha naturally chooses a kimono proper to the season. […] More muted colors are suitable for winter, fresher ones for the hot months. There are also traditional color combinations for each month: pale green layered on deep purple for January, rose backed with slate blue for October. The designs of the kimono, whether dyed (as in the dressier garments) or woven in, always reflect the season. [She] selects a kimono with the appropriate flowers, plants, insects, or birds: sprigs of pine in January, plum blossom in February, cherry blossom in the spring, small trout in summer, maple leaves in autumn, and snowflakes in the winter. It is all part of the process of living one's life as art."* (Downer, 2001, pp. 80-179).

On yet another level, one can count on various fashion magazines, such as the chic *Utsukushii kimono* (*美しいキモノ*), to reinforce this tendency with issues regularly dedicated to seasonal coordinates, reformulating years after years the idea that a kimono is at its best when it reflects the season one is experiencing with socially accepted, normalized outfits (Fig. 3).

The comprehensive survey led by Terada Kyoko of the *yukata* presented in *Utsukushii kimono* brings further proof that the magazine is aiming at consistently reminding kimono wearers about the proper image to adopt for each season, namely here the summer season. Spanning from 1954 to 2001, the study also confirms the overwhelming presence of flowers, the majority of which are summer flowers (irises, hydrangea, morning glories, thistle etc.). Surprisingly, *yukata* adorned with flowers connected to other seasons than summer are also present (Terada *et al.*, 2002, p. 59).

Figure 3: Cover of the Fall 2022 issue of Utsukushii Kimono magazine, with an accent on how to "polish" one's chic image this coming autumn with tsumugi and komon kimono. Photo: courtesy of Hearst/Fujingaho publishing group (Hearst. Fujinghao, 2024)

Overall, the recurrent presentation of seasonal kimono via monthly magazines can be understood as a guiding principle, not mandatory but strongly encouraged. Arguably, the magazines might have been invited to create such content by the different kimono dressing schools (*着物着付け教室 kimono kitsuke kyoshitsu*), that hold a certain position of authority (Valk, 2024) and by what people want to see, tying the offer and demand loop together neatly. Put differently, magazines reflect and in the meantime create kimono taste. Brian Moeran in his study of *Katei Gahō* (*家庭画報*) magazine notes:

> *"By depicting 'beautiful nature' Katei Gahō tries to make people think differently about why they need certain things. […] Katei Gahō makes readers realize through its features on fashion, cuisine and interior decor that neither food nor materials in general are what they used to be, and that nature should not merely provide some kind of aesthetic pleasure to be savored by the five senses, but should itself form the kernel of an overall Japanese lifestyle, and hence of readers' very being."* (Moeran, 1995, p. 123)

Eventually, intersecting commercial rhythm and domestic rhythm (Daniels, 2020 [2009]), these different kimono practices consolidate one another, at the same time pertaining to individual and social choices. These practices go from the micro levels (fibers, weaving techniques, ways to collect and care for kimono throughout the years) to the macro levels (mutually recognized ways of layering, tailoring and combining kimono to put it on display). As a result, dressing in kimono is an act that engages people extensively as they not only dress for themselves — accommodating their own personal circumstances — but also dress for others to see — corresponding to social expectations. On both ends of this fashionable "equation", the motifs that are woven/printed/dyed/painted onto the surface of the kimono play a crucial role. Studying them in detail is of importance to understand all the parameters of kimono visual and cultural impact, as discussed below.

Part 2: Seasons and kimono: playing with motifs

In order to complete the survey on the seasonal principles that impact the conception and culture of the kimono, the appeal of coloured motifs and patterns have on kimono enthusiasts has to be noted. Patterns surely help the wearer to express his or her appreciation of the season and they help index the season via visual assertions, the most effective of the communicative tools, as vision is direct, immediate, tangible and eye opening all at the same time. As phrased by Caleb Gattegno:

> *"Sight is swift, comprehensive, simultaneously analytic, and synthetic. It requires so little energy to function, [and] it permits our minds to receive and hold an infinite number of items of information in a fraction of a second. With sight, infinities are given at once, wealth is its description."* (Gattegno, 1969, p. 9)

While the production techniques (notably weaving), tailoring techniques and everyday practices listed above can be understood as the "grammar" of kimono (related to the very "structure" of the garment), motifs can be the kimono's "vocabulary" that reference the seasons with inherent articulation, either perfectly matching the season in terms of timing or foreshadowing it (a fashion choice called *sakidori* (*先取り*)). Furthermore, patterns can be used to create refreshing contrasts, they can be stylized yet realistic, or at times clearly more abstract. To finish, the new tendency of dialing seasons through "artistic kimono" pieces and via imported/Western seasons can be also be added.

2.1 The timeless "classics"

In this category, one of the most iconic is the *sakura* (*桜*) cherry blossoms pattern which is allegedly the most recurrent motif on spring kimono, matching with *hanami* (*花見*) flower viewing, the epitome of spring appreciation. Dressing in kimono to celebrate the coming (and going) of the ever so delicate flowers has been a well observed ritual, as evidenced with *kosode* kimono from the Edo period (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Kosode kimono with spread motifs of Clouds and Cherry Trees (Edo Period). Photo: courtesy of Tōkyō National Museum (ColBase 2024)

In contemporary Japan, *sakura* kimono aligns to *hanami* too, with the added idea of pilgrimage to favorite "touristy" or "Instagram worthy" spots, creating a pocket of time solely dedicated to jolly and more than ever Japanese thoughts. A discourse that is employed by kimono rental shops, repeating the performativity of the spring with kimono, harmonizing everyone, people and flowers alike, in an explosion of pink and off white hues (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Two women in spring kimono enjoying the cherry blossoms. Photo: courtesy of Vasara (rental kimono shop) (Vasara, 2019).

Dressing up in spring colored kimono is evidently a celebration of cheerful and positive feelings. But a more pensive emotion can also come along. A passage from *The Makioka Sisters*, Tanizaki Jun'Ichiro's famous family saga, reflects the more introspective mood that *hanami* can provoke in people. The characters, who are all living in a rather protected, wealthy, "bubbly" world yet still affected by emotional turmoil (Suzuki, 2023, pp. 65-99) are described as all dressed up in beautiful spring kimono, strolling among the blooming trees and letting their thoughts drift away:

> *"Sachiko and Etsuko, turned away from the camera, were looking out over the rippled surface of the lake from under the same cherry tree, and the two rapt figures, mother and daughter, with*

cherry petals fallings on the gay kimono of the little girl, seemed the very incarnation of regret for the passing of spring." (Tanizaki, 1995 [1943], p. 87).

Going back in the history of kimono fashion, the association of spring kimono with *yamabuki* (*山吹*) or Kerria can also be evoked, since they are flowers that mark the coming of spring as surely as cherry blossoms. The beauty and appeal of Kerria can be seen for instance in another Edo period *kosode* (Fig.6 a and b), which resonates with the following poem by Yoshimine no Harutoshi (*良岑玄利*), Priest Sosei's pen name (*素性法師*):

山吹の花色衣ぬしやたれとへどこたへずくちなしにして

Yamabuki no hana iro koromo nushi ya tare toedo kotaezu kuchinashi ni shite

"Will you tell me who the owner is,

of the robe dyed the yellow of blossoming kerria?

I ask but get no answer from this mouthless gardenia." (Kokinshû, Book XIX, poem n. 1012)

Figure 6a and b: Front and back view of a Kosode robe with Snowflakes and Kerria Roses (Edo period). Photo: courtesy of Tōkyō National Museum (ColBase, 2020).

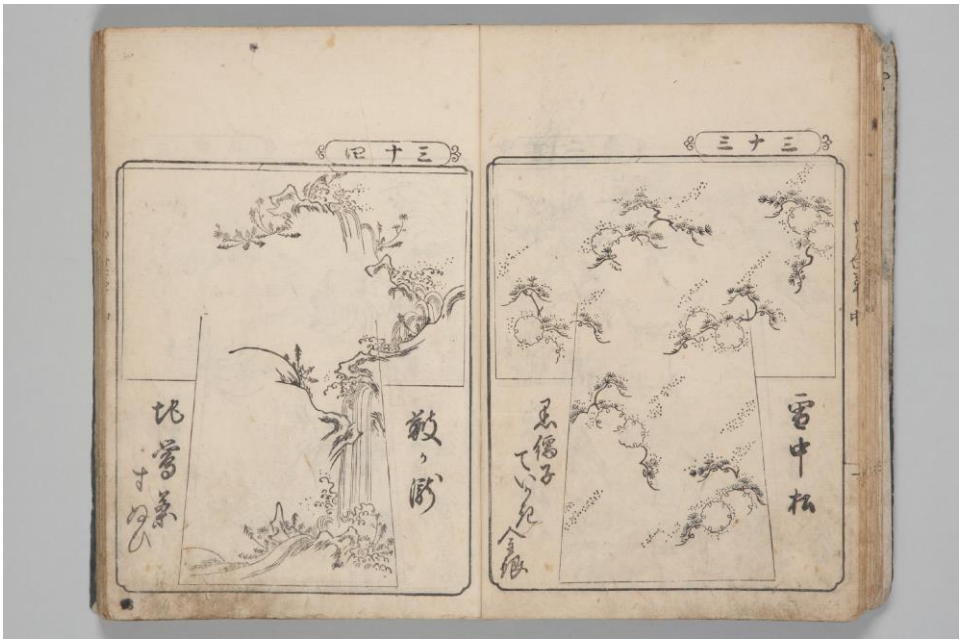

Figure 7: 三文字屋 弥四郎 Sanmonjiya Yashirō ひゐながた千歳草 *Hiinagata Chitosegusa* Design # 33 (1754), right page. Photo: courtesy of the Bunka Gakuen Library - Digital Archive of Rare Materials (Bunka Gakuen Library 2024)

Figure 8a and b: Kimono (front view and close-up) adorned with nandina under snow motif (Taisho era). Photo: courtesy of Obebe to Nyanko rental shop (Antique Kimono Rental Salon) (OBEBETO-NYANKO, 2023)

Continuing in the category of classic motifs, with *yukimochi* (*雪持ち*) or snow laden plant motifs. Naturally, the plants seen in this winter ecology are evergreens, trees or shrubs, such as *matsu* (松 pine tree)(Figure 7), flowering *tsubaki* (*椿* camellia), and

berry bearing *nanten* (*南天* nandina) (Figure 8 a and b), all covered with a thick and fluffy layer of white snow that contrasts with the green, pink and red of each plants. With such pattern, it is the idea of matching the kimono perfectly with winter scenery that can be suggested. On a more metaphorical level, this type of motif bears the idea of persistence and hope that better days are coming soon, hence aiming at the *sakidori* (*先取り*) culture, which is to convey feelings towards a season that hasn't come yet.

Using one's outfit to make a nod to the next "season" is a mark of remarkable sensitivity, an elegant quality one should train their heart for and keep their eyes on. In fact, doing anything against that grain and dressing in hues or motifs that are of the passed / past season would be considered a major "fashion faux-pas". As suggested by lady Sei Shōnagon in her *Pillow Book*: "Depressing things: A red plum-blossom dress in the Third or Fourth Months" (Shonagon & Morris, 1971, p. 40). Her harsh judgment is formulated so that anyone gets reminded that red plum-blossoms hues are good for January or February, when plum trees are indeed in bloom, and anyone dressed as such in March or April would be seen as outdated, hence depressing.

Sakidori linkage can also be studied with unlined summer kimono and *obi*, as they are often adorned with flowers and plants recognized as autumn markers, such as *kikyō* (*桔梗* bell flowers). The kimono below (Fig. 8a and b) showcases said flower while bearing one of the most iconic symbol of summer, *chidori* (*千鳥*) or plover birds, hovering over streams of water.

Figure 9a and b: Summer Kimono with Design of Plovers, Waves, Chinese Bellflowers, Pinks, Pines, Carriages, and Fences. Photo: courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (TheMet, 2024)

Closing the classic motif category with a roundel motif named *yukinowa* (*雪の輪* snowflakes circles). A more radical — if not disorienting in terms of seasonal connection —, motif that is usually found on *yukata* and summer kimono. It may seem counter intuitive at first, but suggesting snowflakes brings a cool feeling to one's body when enduring the blunt of the summer heat. As seen in the following example (Figure 10), *yukinowa* can be big and splashing all over the surface of the kimono and the dark blue color furthers the cool effect.

Figure 10: Yukata with Design of Stylized Snowflakes. Photo: courtesy of Rakuten Fashion (Utatane, 2025).

2.2 Creative approaches: Kimono as art / Kimono in "Western" seasons

Besides the classic formulations of seasons in kimono, a number of designs take a more artistic road, for more creative interpretations of seasons. A prime example are the creations by Kubota Itchiku (久保田一竹, 1917-2003). Displaying an extravagant take on natural phenomena, Itchiku used the kimono surface to express the subtle yet spectacular variations in light, volume, texture of landscapes with intricate tie and dye technique. Approaching the divine, the kimono he designed all seem bigger than reality. They are all tied to spectacular natural imagery, often placing Mount Fuji as a central, eternal figure. In the series titled *Symphony of Light*, the kimono, designed to function as individual canvases that can connect to one another to form a large panoramic view of a dreamt wonderland, all the seasons are present, with all their nuances, such as the micro season when frozen land finally thaws at the end of winter (Figure 11a and b).

The work of Aoki Sue (青木寿恵, born 1926) is also relevant in this category, for instance the piece representing Canadian autumn (Fig.12), rendered with a stunning depiction of a full size mountain landscape. Employing a more radical approach, the works by national treasure Moriguchi Kunihiko (森口邦彦, born 1941) can also be listed. The level of abstraction shows how seasons not only inspire via colours, flowers and plants but also via vibrancy and optical appeal (Fig.13).

Figure 11a and b: Furisode kimono (full view and detail) by Kubota Itchiku (久保田一竹, 1917-2003) titled The Spring thaw begins [Symphony of light series, No.30]. Photo: courtesy of Kubota Itchiku official website. (The Kubota Collection, 2021)

Figure 12: Aoki Sue (青木寿恵, born 1926) Canadian autumn (カナダの秋, 2018-2019). Photo: courtesy of Aoki Sue official website (Sue Sarasa Museum of Art, 2024)

Figure 13: Moriguchi Kunihiko (森口邦彦, born 1941) The beginning of spring (立春, 2019). Photo: courtesy of Japan Kogei Association (Japan Kogei Association, 2019)

The visual tour of seasonal kimono motifs cannot be complete without the mention of the ones related to "imported" non-Japanese seasonal markers and rites. The first wave of imported seasonal motifs is connected to the adoption of foreign flowers and plants as kimono patterns. As eloquently analysed by Nagasaki Iwao, from the Meiji era (1868-1912) and on, kimono designers came to establish a whole new nomenclature, integrating notably Western roses, "the queen of flowers", in mixed seasonal landscapes that paired them with Japanese flowers, or in compositions using the roses alone (Nagasaki, 2023, pp. 26-9). Tulips, sunflowers and Russian lilies, to signal spring and summer with a new modern touch also became part of the kimono vocabulary during the Meiji era.

The second wave of import would be with the recent inclusion of Halloween and Christmas as cultural practices. Halloween in Japan is a rather adult oriented event, with people in their twenties and thirties enjoying costuming themselves to go to drinking parties. The costumes are often wildly diverse and overlapping with the practice of cosplay. But when it involves kimono, it is interesting to see that it is the "traditional" iconography of Halloween that is being displayed rather than specific stereotypes roles such as "sexy nurse", "freaky zombie" or "spooky pirate". As a result, Halloween kimono outfits play with an array of figures and symbols: night creatures (cats, owls), spider webs, "Hocus Pocus" witch imagery, skeletons or carved pumpkins as well as color combinations (orange/black/purple), having either the whole outfit on full Halloween mode or just small accessories on. A whole new set of possibilities has therefore been opened to kimono enthusiasts, as playfully suggested by Kikuchi Ima, in the illustration she did for the online kimono magazine *Kimonoto* (Fig. 14):

Figure 14: Kikuchi Ima (きくちいま, born 1973) "Kimono Halloween" illustration for the online kimono magazine kimonoto (10/2020). Photo: courtesy of Kimonoto/Kimonoichiba (Kikuchi, 2020)

A similar sense of joy and playfulness can be noted with Christmas kimono or kimono arranged to express Christmasy aesthetic: red/green color combination, Santa Claus figures, Christmas trees, Christmas decorations, or Christmas Wreath (Figure 15).

With designers, shops, magazines and social medias that keep advertising "Western", "Halloween" or "Christmas" branded kimono outfits, it can be noted that exploring not only the regular Japanese seasons but also new, cute, ritual-centered "holiday seasons" has become trendy, and such celebratory occasions appear like renewed invitations to dress in kimono — which contemporary Japanese society tend to lack

nowadays — as well as refreshed takes on design. This makes culture of kimono more visual, more visible, and all the more connected to life with the seasons.

Figure 15: Obi with a Cat Christmas Wreath motif sold by Gofukuyasan. Photo: courtesy of Gofukuyasan website (Gofukuyasan, 2020)

Conclusion

Looking at seasons in kimono is looking at nuances, following the guidance of nature, of culture, conforming to it and at times beautifully, poetically going against the established expectations. It is embracing not only regulated modes, curated imagery and degrees of Japaneseness but also the diverse array of tiny moments that mark the year and playfully rearrange national, regional and / or personal narratives.

On another level, studying seasons in kimono/kimono seasons brings the issue of how clothing practices are learned and transmitted. Seeing the seasons discussed and exposed in magazines, texts, commercials, reflected in novels, poems and oral traditions creates a virtuous circle of collegial understandings and dialogs. However, this should not negate the fact that such attitude can implement a negative push to buy kimono in a reified, shallow manner. As stated by Moeran and Skov: "In contemporary Japan, changes of the seasons are related to cycles of consumption, and certain images — like those of mount Fuji and cherry blossoms — are used as a means of persuading people to buy things" (Moeran & Skov, 1997, p. 189). As noted by Sheila Cliffe, the kimono seasonal connection can also be an obstacle, prompting self censorship for some people, while being a source of incredible inspiration for others (Cliffe, 2017, p. 195).

Ultimately, understanding the gesture that is seeing and reading the seasons in / with kimono is to realize that kimono is in a spectrum and to be appreciated fully, it has to remain dynamic and malleable like a visual language. By celebrating its multiple formats, from classic to new references, the kimono fashion and culture will keep its systems and territories alive.

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She is particularly interested in the intersection of dress and dressing, clothing and embodiment, currently developing projects on how kimono is practiced in festivals and in real life (Maiko and Geiko communities as well as tourists renting kimono in Kyōto) and how it is elaborated in works of poetry and fiction (specifically Yosano Akiko, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Ariyoshi Sawako and Hayashi Mariko).

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