

***Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Japan.* Annie Van Assche, ed. Milan: 5 Continents, 2005. 327 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Carrie Hertz

From October 13, 2005 through May 1, 2006 the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) held an exhibition of exquisite kimono from the Montgomery Collection entitled “Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Japan” that presented examples dating from the Edo through the Showa periods (1860s-1950s). An exhibit catalogue of the same name and edited by Annie Van Assche was produced along with the exhibit. This stunning catalogue boasts one hundred and thirty-nine full page, color photographs of each kimono (and *haori* jackets) featured in the exhibit as well as five contextualizing articles mostly of a scholarly nature.

Three-fourths of *Fashioning Kimono* swells with art museum style color photographs of individual objects. Rather than displayed on mannequins revealing the fabric drape and play of design on the body, the kimono are laid flat against solid backdrops and photographed to highlight the overall surface design. The result is visually impressive and illustrative of the theoretical focus of the catalogue as the product of a museum of art and design exhibition.

“Interweavings: Kimono Past and Present” written by Annie Van Assche serves as an introductory glimpse into the V&A exhibit and the world of kimono fashion. Van Assche defines the kimono, the “national dress of Japan,” as a “one-piece, front-wrap garment with a rectangular form” (p. 7). With antecedents in seventh-century Chinese court dress, the form of the kimono has remained relatively stable over hundreds of years. However, Van Assche never portrays kimono as stagnant or frozen, as devoid of fashion. Instead, she devotes most of her discussion to presenting the interplay between traditional artistry and changing trends. The author analyzes the garment as a material object by focusing on form as well as fabric varieties, production, dying, and design techniques. In a series of sections that explore various fabrication methods accompanied with diagrams and photographs of artists performing the described techniques, Van Assche foregrounds the contemporary vivacity of kimono design. Each section provides not only the explanation of a given fabrication method but also a brief overview of the social-cultural milieu that introduced and perpetuated the style as well as the individuals or categories of people most significantly involved in the invention, production, or consumption of it.

As Van Assche clearly articulates, the examination of the kimono cannot end with formal analysis but must include an understanding of Japanese culture and history in which the garment is situated. Van Assche attempts to supply the reader with a few analytical tools in which to evaluate the many photographs through a brief discussion of popular design motifs, their emic names and traditional associations, as well as a quick historical outline of the fashion trends representative of the historical periods found in the Montgomery Collection, especially the introduction of Western clothing during the Meiji period. Despite this important contextualizing

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information, the treatment is too cursory for a novice viewer to delve much further than the surface beauty of the pieces, which appear divorced from the discussion.

Anna Jackson's more tightly focused article, "Dynamic Lines and Syncopated Rhythms: Art Nouveau and Art Deco Designs in Early Twentieth-Century Kimono," explores Japan's participation in a larger, global fashion, art, and industry context by examining the reciprocal inspiration of art movements featured heavily within the objects of the Montgomery Collection. Jackson offers an intimate look at Art Nouveau and Art Deco through the lens of national posturing encouraged by World's Fairs exhibitions in which Japan competed for acceptance as a modern power. Since both art movements were themselves influenced by Asian style and design motifs, their (re)introduction into the Japanese art world was ultimately conservative, a "stylistic synthesis" rather than Western "emulation" (p. 31). Through formal analyses of several examples within the Montgomery Collection, Jackson successfully integrates the featured images within a larger art-historical discourse by illustrating how the physical objects reveal the spirit of the age in which they were created.

Elise K. Tipton, in her article "Atarashi Onna: The New Japanese Woman," steps outside the world of art and production to explore the feminist movement in Japan during the early twentieth century. Although Tipton's focus does not include a thorough discussion of the kimono's role in women's social and economic advancements during this period, she does set a scene of impassioned struggle and excitement among Japanese women who, despite the media's characterization of the "new woman" as morally suspect and aggressively Western, embraced the new, bold kimono designs that reflected not a rejection of tradition but a fusion of modern and traditional, Eastern and Western sensibilities. By comparing Jackson's and Tipton's contributions, one may surmise that women's kimono, more dynamic and dramatic than the few men's examples in the Montgomery Collection, reveal early twentieth-century Japanese art, fashion, and political movements carving out parallel paths.

The final scholarly article, "The Kimono and Parisian Mode" by Akiko Fukai, further exemplifies the continuous thematic thread weaving throughout the catalogue articles: the modes of interconnectivity between Japan and Europe, East and West. Fukai examines the influence of the kimono—its formal construction, textiles, and characteristic surface designs—on Parisian couture at the start of the twentieth century. While Van Assche advocates in her introduction an emic presentation of the kimono, the overarching thrust of *Fashioning Kimono's* catalogue situates the kimono in dialog with the West. The kimono is declared a style of dress "quintessentially Japanese" but reinterpreted as a symbol of cultural exchange and modernity for a primarily Western audience in a prominent British museum.

The moment in which this presentation is broadened offers a glimpse of the kimono in a new glimmering light. Reiko M. Brandon's "Kimono Memories: Personal Notes" is a biographical sketch of the author's experiences wearing and observing kimono within the context of everyday life. While the scholarly articles concentrate on design, fashion history, and globalized interpretations, Brandon's article privileges the local and individual by revealing the personal deliciousness of owning beautiful, cherished objects, the sensuous sounds, smells, textures of a physical possession. "Kimono Memories" adds a sophisticated balance between art and functionality as well as the communal and individual interaction with clothing by infusing

personal biography, individual creativity, and sensuous reality into a collection of beautiful but otherwise flatly displayed garments divorced from human bodies and individual lives. The scholars of *Fashioning Kimono* offer the reader the kimono as an exquisite art object seen through the eyes of an adoring Western audience; Brandon reminds us that clothing, indelibly woven into the fabric of everyday life, is designed to be worn. As she concludes, “wearing a kimono is, in itself, an art” (p. 47).

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