

The Japanese Kimono and Its Cultural Representation

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Just how much is cultural dress influenced by the rest of the world? How is the rest of the world influenced by cultural dress? Fashion is all interconnected, so everything is influenced by or is an influence of something new and innovative. Japanese cultural dress is iconic and has inspired many new designs, but the rest of the world has influenced how it looks too. It has a meaning distinct to the culture it represents yet still reflects the trends of the modern world. It changed the way the world looked at the close of the 19th century and was changed by the trends that came after that time. But through these changes, it was able to remain the artfully crafted garment that is associated with the rich culture it represents.

Japanese cultural dress is defined by its beautifully crafted garments, but one form in particular stands out from the rest. The kimono is a defining piece of Japanese traditional dress and is renowned for its construction and the detail in the craftsmanship. Traditional Japanese clothing is called a wafuku, which consists of the intricate robes, called kimonos, worn with an obi and sandals, known as either zōri or geta. The obi is a type of sash worn with kimonos that is wrapped and tied around the waist. Most obi are extremely ornate and thick, and the art of tying one is traditionally passed down by mothers. The obi adds yet another ornate detail to the beautiful garment and acts as a closure to the robe-like structure of the kimono. This style has been worn by both men and women for the past 1,000 years, with decorative aspects changing depending on the gender (Ensign, 2021). The wafuku was originally worn as daily wear and was customary until the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when Japanese men started to adopt the clothing associated with the Western world. However, women continued to wear the dress into the 20th century; therefore, the kimono is now primarily associated with women rather than men (Valk, 2018). Japan has now fully adopted Western wear for their daily lives, so the kimono has taken

on a much more symbolic meaning in their culture. It is now a special garment worn for important life events, called their kankonsōsai, and is worn for occasions such as weddings, funerals, graduation ceremonies, and other similar events (Valk, 2018). The kimono is also a representation of how girls will fit in with society. At her coming-of-age ceremony, if a young woman is not wearing the correct color or style of furisode, a kimono with swinging sleeves attached, she would be shamed and would be considered as unsuitable to be a good wife or wise mother (Valk, 2018). However, political significance also exists behind this iconic cultural dress. Pound mentions this in her 2020 article by claiming:

During the Edo Period (1630-1868) ... the samurai, Japan's ruling military class, had gained their status and wealth from success on the battlefield. As Western nobility and Royalty would have an elaborate ensemble for every occasion, so the samurai women would have a richly embroidered and printed kimono for theirs.

The print and color of the kimono alone could signify anything regarding class, career, political status, or even religious beliefs. Because of its versatile meanings, the kimono has become an iconic symbol of Japanese culture all over the world.

Fashion today is heavily influenced by many factors, and beautiful cultural dress impacts fashion depending on what nation is in the spotlight at the time. Kimono styles and embroidery motifs have particularly been impacting fashion trends today, and prominent features of the kimono can be seen in pieces everywhere. One aspect of silhouette that has been adopted as a new trend is the large sleeves. These are known as "bell sleeves" to consumers, but in the Japanese kimono, these oversized sleeves are called a furisode, as mentioned earlier. Long sleeves that are uncuffed and wider at the base have been a staple silhouette for many years. This figure could have been heavily influenced by the original kimono sleeves, as in the 1950s

Japanese fashion started to take on a look much closer to that of the Western styles. Another aspect of Japanese silhouette that is seen in American dress today is the belted waist, also known as an obi. This thick belt that ties in the back is a major decorative element of the wafuku and similar styles are emerging in Western wear. Detailing on the back of garments has become increasingly popular over the last few years, and the inspiration from those garments can be seen in the delicate details of the wafuku. A final direct influence on American fashion comes from the zōri, which are the traditional shoes worn with the wafuku. “Zōri are a type of sandal or thong similar to the modern flip-flop. … They’re now worn with both kimonos and the more popular Western clothing” (Ensign, 2021). The flip-flop is an extremely common style of footwear in America, and more designs have been inspired because of it, which shows that Japanese cultural influence reaches much farther than most would think. The kimono was not the only influence on American fashion. “Japanese aesthetics inspired Art Nouveau and Jugendstil, among other western art movements” (Chrisman-Campbell, 2014). The Art Nouveau movement was extremely popular in the late 19th century up until the Art Deco movement took over in the 1920s. Japanese aesthetics, such as their cultural dress, inspired an art movement that reached far and wide and had a tremendous effect on fashion and even architecture. “Art Nouveau’s modernity was achieved through the combination of disparate sources … making it one of the most complex intellectual and aesthetic forces in the history of decorative art” (Greenhalgh, 2000). In combination with others, the Japanese cultural elements inspired an aesthetic that was unseen before this time and that is still easily recognizable today. All these small aesthetic pieces inspired so many artists and designers to create pieces that were revolutionary and that are still affecting the way fashion is viewed today.

While these small inspirations are creating similarities between American and Japanese dress, cultural appropriation is also occurring because of the obsession with cultural dress. In 2015, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston held a series of events called Kimono Wednesdays, where visitors were encouraged to try on a replica of a kimono and take a photo in front of a famous Japanese work of art. These events caused protests about how Japanese clothing was not a costume and started the conversation about how people tend to curate culture for desirability (Matsukawa, 2019). This tone-deaf event puts into perspective just how easy it is to turn from admiration of cultural dress to insulting the people who know the true meaning behind it. However, not all Japanese designers believe that the wearing of kimono by non-Japanese people is considered cultural appropriation. Anna Jackson, curator of “Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk” at a London Museum says in Socha’s 2020 article:

While there are many cases of quite clear cultural appropriation, the wearing of kimono and kimono-inspired garments is not quite so straightforward. It has been interpreted as a modern manifestation of 19th century cultural imperialism, the objection based on the notion that the kimono has specific national and traditional significance that should remain unsullied.

Anna goes on to say that the stereotype that Asian clothing is unchanging denies the garment its historical and complex meaning. While some may take the wearing of the other culture’s traditional garments too far, others create new and innovative designs that bring new meaning to the traditions within those cultures.

Like Western dress, Japanese cultural dress has been affected by many different ideas and trends from around the world. In the 1850s, Western styles, called yōfuku, started creeping into

Japanese fashion (Ensign, 2021). Chrisman-Campbell gives examples of this in her 2014 journal, saying:

Far from being frozen in time, these kimono mirror western fashion trends. One example from the 1930s depicts dragonflies shimmering on waves of flowing water rendered in an intense, unearthly blue-violet, a popular hue at the time. Another has an abstract design of traditional cresting waves and sea foam balanced against a geometric patterned background, consistent with Art Deco aesthetics. On another, large, colorful spots representing dewdrops harmonize with the fashion for polka dots.

Since kimono design has been influenced so much in the past, it only makes sense that the trends of the future will also be reflected in Japanese cultural dress. The bold color and abstract patterns that are popular in this decade will most likely be reflected into the designs of kimonos. They will be especially present in the traditional dress of young women, as they are the ones currently wearing and following the trends of the time. Creating patterns consistent with what the younger generation finds appealing allows them to have more room to freely express themselves, even in their cultural dress. However, as Chrisman-Campbell mentioned earlier, the trends of the time have been reformatted to have a deeper meaning, such as the dewdrops or the waves of the sea. One simply cannot have a random pattern without meaning, so when adopting these new trends from around the world, one can wonder how they will adapt them to create a deeper meaning to their already rich cultural heritage.

The Japanese cultural dress, wafuku, is easily recognizable for its iconic silhouette and its beautifully constructed patterns. The kimono has been around for thousands of years and over that time has developed a meaning that is specific and unique to the Japanese culture. It is used for events that are special or memorable in the lives of the Japanese but was worn as a symbol of

status or power in the past. It inspired the Art Nouveau movement and is still affecting the silhouettes of American fashion today. New designs have been adopted to better reflect the trends of the time, but each of those new designs has meaning that allows them to carry on the traditions of the past while merging with the present. The kimono is an iconic piece that has been used unintentionally for cultural appropriation in the past but is being used as a lesson for future generations. The kimono has been shifted stylistically by the events and influences of the rest of the world, but still takes on a meaning to its culture that most cannot even begin to grasp.

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