

JAPAN: THE ART OF RESTRAINED ELEGANCE

For more than 1,000 years textiles have played an important role in Japanese culture. The artistic skill developed by the Japanese in dyeing, spinning, and weaving elevated the status of fabric so that for many years it was used as currency, given as gifts, and signified the status and rank of the individual. Throughout the history of Japanese costume there have been two recurring themes: desire and restraint. While the nobility and common people were desirous of showing off the beautiful fabrics their artists created, the Emperor and Shogunate enacted laws against extravagance and to maintain social order.

Asuka Period (538-710 A.D.)
Prince Shotoku introduced the system of social hierarchy in his court based on clothing color. Court colors were purple, blue, red, yellow, white and black. Each color corresponded to a human virtue. For example, black symbolized wisdom and was the lowest rank whereas blue, the second-highest rank, symbolized human excellence. Even though people could be promoted to a higher rank, they could only wear the colors of the rank they were born into.



This kimono, with its simple design, rich fabric, and perfectly selected colors exemplifies the concept of restrained elegance.
Source: Liddell, *The Story of the Kimono*, 1989.

Nara Period (710-794 A.D.)

It was during the Nara period that the Court Dress and Cap Regulating Office ordered people to fold the left side of their kimono across the front of the right side, and to this day the Japanese still fold their kimono left over right.

Edo Period (1603-1867)

During the Edo period the artisan class, rather than the nobility, became the fashion trendsetters. In particular, Kabuki dancers were medieval Japan's equivalent to movie stars. It was a male kabuki dancer who first introduced the obi, the large wide sash that is tied around the waist of the kimono. The dancer was extremely tall, and since he was playing the role of a woman, he thought tying a large wide sash around his waist would make him appear smaller. For hundreds of years women used thin strips of ribbon tied loosely around the waist to keep their kimono shut. When the female members of the audience saw the obi, and the elaborate way in which it was tied, they went wild. Since this time the obi, not strips of ribbon, have been tied around the kimono.

As quickly as artisans bent the rules of fashion the Shoguns enacted laws to bring them back under control.

Business was conducted while seated on the ground. Therefore width, not height, conveyed power. Note how wide this man's shoulders are made to look by his robe. During the Heian Period (794-1185 A.D.) court members were expected to wear between twelve and twenty layers of silk, thus making them very heavy, so conducting business on the ground was a necessity.
Source: Liddell, *The Story of the Kimono*, 1989.



Kabuki dancers were on the cutting edge of fashion. Court members took ideas from the stage and incorporated them into their daily lives.
Source: Liddell, *The Story of the Kimono*, 1989.

Ban of Tenna, 1682-1683, Shogun Tsunayoshi

- ❖ Merchants forbidden to wear certain kinds of silk
- ❖ Commoners forbidden to wear embroidery
- ❖ Nobility were the only class permitted to wear stenciled gold and silver *surihaku* patterns on their clothing
- ❖ Kanoka, a time consuming and expensive form of producing textiles, was forbidden to everybody

During the next 200 years the Shoguns instituted more clothing edicts attempting to curb merchant class extravagance. Commoners were restricted to wearing blues, browns and grays, but when merchants flooded the market with luxurious fabrics in those colors, the government then forbade peasants from wearing the silk they produced. The laws limited clothing for commoners to only fabrics made of bast fibers such as hemp, mulberry and wisteria.

Restrained Elegance

Eventually the people found a way to create balance between their desires and the law. Restrained elegance (called *wabi-shibu*) came into practice around the Edo Period. *Wabi-shibu* was not a law issued by the emperor, but a self-imposed aesthetic by the public who came to believe clothing should be worn in a balanced way. Their fabric was always rich and exquisite, but the colors and patterns were subtle, not flashy.

This illustration includes the rules and regulations pertaining to women and court dress. Notice that the woman's kimono is folded left over right.
Source: Liddell, *The Story of the Kimono*, 1989.



This woman is displaying the traditional narrow sash tied around the waist that was fashionable prior to the introduction of the wide, elaborately tied obi.
Source: Liddell, *The Story of the Kimono*, 1989.