

FASHION

From court dress to designer brands

Japanese Dress in Former Times

Existing records indicate that prior to the 4th century Japanese males wrapped themselves in lengths of cloth that hung from the shoulder, while women used a single piece of cloth with an opening in the center which fit around their necks. These types of clothing were also found in other parts of the world, such as ancient Greece and Rome, Indonesia, and Peru.

The use of sewn clothing dates from around the 4th century, when the political structure known as the Yamato court (*Yamato chotei*) was in a developing stage. Both men and women wore an upper garment which extended below the waist and had straight, tight sleeves. For a lower garment, men wore loose trouserlike *hakama*, while women wore long, pleated skirts known as *mo*.

During the Asuka (593–710) and Nara (710–794) periods, when Buddhism was introduced and Chinese culture was popular, the apparel worn by persons associated with the imperial court showed strong Chinese influences.

During the Heian period (794–1185), court dress was divided into three categories: dress for special ceremonies, formal dress to be worn at the imperial court, and ordinary dress for other occasions. The formal apparel for men was known as *sokutai*. Women's clothing was worn in many layers; there were twelve layers for the formal dress known as *junihitoe*.

During the Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1333–1568) periods, the men of the warrior (*samurai*) class who were at the seat of government wore *sokutai* on formal occasions, but their ordinary dress was known



Junihitoe

A woman in ceremonial court dress (junihitoe). (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

as *kariginu*, based on the clothing worn on hunting expeditions. Women of the *samurai* class on ordinary occasions wore quilted silk garments known as *kosode*, not unlike a type of formal traditional women's clothing still used at present. But on formal occasions they wore the long robes known as *uchikake*.

In the Edo period (1603–1868), men of the warrior class wore outfits known as *kamishimo* when attending the *shogun*, but on ordinary occasions both men and women wore *kosode* and *hakama*. It became customary to wear lengths of cloth wrapped around the waist and known as *obi*; men of the warrior class attached swords to their *obi*. Women's *obi* gradually became wider and more decorative. At the beginning of the Edo period many people dressed very simply, though on formal occasions women might wear *uchikake*. But even everyday wear gradually became more handsome with the

An obi
An *obi* (sash) used with a kimono.
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)



emergence of the attractive dyed materials and tasteful patterns that are still seen in today's kimono.

From Japanese to Western Dress

After the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912), Western-style uniforms were adopted for persons serving in the military services, for policemen, and for postal carriers. This provided a particularly strong impetus to the great changes that occurred over time in Japanese dress. However, in the early Meiji period the kimono predominated. For formal occasions men typically wore *haori* (traditional waistcoats), *hakama*, and Western-style hats, while some women, otherwise dressed in Japanese style, took to wearing Western-type boots. This mixed Japanese-Western style of boots with kimono may still be seen today among young women attending university graduation ceremonies.

By the beginning of the Showa period (1926–1989), men's clothing had become largely Western, and the business suit was standard apparel for company employees. Western clothing was also often worn by working women and many women also began to wear Western clothing even in the home.

Japan's Often-Changing Modern Fashion

The 1940s

With the end of the Second World War, women discarded the loose-fitting pantaloons called *monpe* that had been required wear for war-related work and began wearing skirts. At that time most of the fashions that entered Japan were from the United States. From the late 1940s and into the 1950s, women were fond of the so-called "American style" with

narrow-waisted long skirts flaring out at the bottom and wide belts.

To a certain extent, Paris fashions were also introduced by way of the United States. In 1947, Christian Dior made his debut with his Paris Collection, and a considerable amount of information about Dior's new look made its way to Japan, via the United States, the next year. Japanese women were caught up in a flurry of interest in this "new look" that was becoming popular around the world.

The 1950s

In an era when overseas travel was still out of the question for most people, movies were a major source of information on overseas fashion. Many foreign films were shown in Japan, giving the Japanese people opportunities to see European and American fashions and daily life. Numerous fads were born as a result. When the English film *The Red Shoes* was screened in 1950, red shoes immediately became popular among young people. When the film *Sabrina*, starring Audrey Hepburn, was screened in 1954, young women became fond of treader pants and "Sabrina shoes."

After the screening in 1956 of *Taiyo no kisetsu* (known in English as *Season of Violence*), based on Ishihara Shintaro's Akutagawa Prize-winning novel of the same name in 1956, many Japanese imitated the fashions of the characters in the film that became known as "the sun tribe" (*taiyo-zoku*). In summer men took to wearing T-shirts, aloha shirts and sunglasses, while women were seen on the streets in colorfully patterned short pants.

The 1960s

In this period young people became the uncontested arbiters of fashion. It was a time of transition from up-market *haute couture* to lower-cost ready-to-wear fashion items referred to in Japanese by the term *puretaporute* (from the French *prêt-à-porter*), and from the formal to the casual.

A woman in a kimono
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)



Graduation ceremony

A young woman dressed up for her university graduation ceremony. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)



The miniskirts exhibited in the Paris Collection in the spring of 1965 were immediately introduced to Japan. The mass media objected that miniskirts were not suited to Japanese women's physiques, but after the visit to Japan in 1967 of the English model Twiggy, who was known as the "miniskirt queen," these items became very popular. Miniskirts were adopted first by younger women and then by older women as well, and they remained a well-established fashion item widely worn until around 1974.

In the case of men's fashion, some big changes came after the mid-1960s. In particular, there was the appearance of the "Ivy style," which paid homage to the supposed fashions of students in America's elite "Ivy League" private universities. This style took up the traditional fashions of America's elite class, and though it went through several minicycles of popularity and decline, it spread from young company employees to the middle-aged.

In contrast to the fashions popular among young people, the suits worn by company employees tended to be conservative dark tones of grey, with the result that Japanese company employees came to be referred to sardonically as *dobunezumi-zoku* (the gutter-rat tribe).

The 1970s

Around the middle of the 1970s, fashions which developed in the port cities of Kobe and Yokohama came to be referred to by the terms *nyutora* (new traditional) and *hamatora* (Yokohama traditional). These were basically the female equivalent of the traditional American Ivy League fashion for men. Catchwords used to identify the *nyutora* style originating in Kobe were *onna-rashisa* (appearing feminine) and *otonappoku mieru* (looking adult). Typical of the *nyutora* style was a plain shirt-blouse worn with a semi-long skirt covering the knees. By contrast, the *hamatora* style originating in Yokohama was characterized by *kodomopposa* (childlike quality), and sweatshirts bearing insignia of designers or sales outlets often had fold-down collars similar to those of polo shirts.

In the latter half of the 1970s, "surfer fashion" became popular among teenagers,

and there was a revival of American fashions of the 1950s.

The 1980s

In the 1980s, when Japan rushed into the so-called bubble economy, there began a boom of what was known as *DC burando*, meaning "designer and character brands," i.e., brands of clothing with insignia or other design concepts which clearly identified specific fashion designers.

Japanese designers like Takada Kenzo, Miyake Issey and Yamamoto Kansai continued to take an active role in the international fashion world and won high praise for their work. A sort of cultlike popularity was won by the fashions of Yamamoto Yoji, of the design group *Y's*; and by the dark-colored and idiosyncratic styles of Kawakubo Rei, of the design group *Comme des Garçons*, which gained attention by being exhibited in the Paris Collection. Attention was also drawn to the fashions of Kikuchi Takeo and Inaba Yoshie, of the design group *Bigi*, and Matsuda Mitsuhiro, of the group *Nicole*.

In the latter half of the 1980s, women's fashions branched out in two directions, one known as the *bodikon* (body-conscious) style, emphasizing the natural lines of the body, and the other known as *shibukaji* (Shibuya casual), originating among high school and university students who frequented the boutiques of Tokyo's Shibuya Ward shopping streets. Around this time the "body-conscious" clothing worn by increasing numbers of women seen dancing in Japan's discos became a frequent topic of conversation. The basic concept behind the popular *shibukaji* style was simplicity and durability.

Even among the company employees previously known as "gutter rats," younger people increasingly began to wear fashionable brand-name apparel. Today, the concepts of "plain" and "sober" are still characteristic of the basic uniform of Japan's *salaryman*. On the other hand, there have been some changes in ideas about the sorts of clothing that are appropriate for business society. For example, many companies allow their employees to come to work dressed in casual clothing on Fridays, prior to weekends.



Shibu-kaji

The *Shibu-kaji* (Shibuya casual) style of fashion was popular among young people in the 1980s. (Photo courtesy of the Color & Design Research Room at Kyoritsu Women's Junior College)



Loose socks

Loose, baggy white socks were all the rage among high school girls in the 1990s. (Photo courtesy of the Color & Design Research Room at Kyoritsu Women's Junior College)

The 1990s

Following the collapse of the “bubble economy,” fashion, like so many other things in the 1990s, may be said to be in a period of confusion with no clear outlook for the future. Some commentators have detected, in the latter half of the decade, elements of orientalism or romanticism. But fundamentally the late 1990s may be called an era of the coexistence of many kinds of styles without any single predominating trend.

Perhaps most noticeable in the 1990s has been the phenomenon whereby fashion-conscious high school and even junior high school girls have taken the lead in setting fashion trends. A common sight on the streets are groups of young girls with, for example, long dyed-brown hair; darkly tanned skin; miniskirts or short pants that flare out at the bottom; and loose, baggy socks that are deliberately allowed to lap over the tops of their shoes.

The 2000s

In the first decade of the 21st century, the deflation which started when the bubble of financial speculation burst in 1990 and the ensuing long economic slump in Japan spread to the world of fashion, as well. There have always been mass-produced, low-priced products available, but the new trend is for products that incorporate the very latest styles with high quality. Known as “fast fashion,” well-known Japanese manufacturers are also expanding overseas. Overseas manufacturers who created the concept of “fast fashion” also broke into the Japanese market, opening shops in large commercial facilities.

At the same time, luxury foreign brands targeting the wealthier classes continue to expand into Japan with shops opening in and around Ginza in Tokyo in a phenomenon which is the opposite of “fast fashion.” In addition, the “Tokyo Girls Collection,” a Fashion show targeting girls and young women in their teens and 20s, started in 2005 and has been growing in popularity each year. They are constantly trying new approaches,

A fashionably dressed man and woman
(Photos courtesy of Japan Fashion Association)

such as a system in which people who see stylish, reasonably priced clothes worn by popular models on the runway can buy them on the spot through cell phone (*keitai*) sites.

The Future of Traditional Japanese Dress

Today, kimono have become much less common a sight in Japan. They are, however, worn by some elderly people who have been used to kimono since their youth, waitresses in certain traditional restaurants, or people who give instruction in, or take lessons in, traditional Japanese arts and customs such as Japanese dance, the tea ceremony, or flower arranging. Kimono are, compared to Western clothing, troublesome to wear and do not lend themselves to physical activity; thus they have virtually disappeared as a practical, daily-life type of dress.

That said, kimono are nonetheless rooted in the life of the Japanese people and are worn on certain important occasions. Events at which women wear kimono include *hatsumode* (the first visit to shrines or temples in the new year), *seijinshiki* (ceremonies feting young people's reaching the age of twenty), university graduation ceremonies, weddings, and other important celebrations and formal parties. On such occasions, girls and unmarried women wear *furisode*, or kimono with long sleeves, whose attractive designs are a fine example of one of the many aspects of traditional Japanese culture that continue to flourish.

