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Book review of *Kimono Meisen: The Karun Thakar Collection*. Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2015. ISBN 978-3897904187

The kimono is well known as the traditional garment of Japan. Indeed this essentially simple, T-shaped robe was once worn by everyone. But 'Kimono' (literally 'wearing things') is in itself a complex assemblage of gowns, sashes, cords, binding-cloths, and accessories, which employs a refined vocabulary and hierarchy of fabric materiality, patterning, texture and quality, the art of which is learned over many years.

A key aesthetic exemplified through kimono, is understatement, perhaps best represented in the sophisticated sensibility of *iki*, a sartorial reaction to the sumptuary edicts of 18th century society, limiting ostentatious display to the social elite. 'Meisen' kimono represents some sharp contrast to these long established ideals. Emerging in the late 19th century, meisen was originally a broad classification for a firm but light-weight mass-produced silk used for kimono, but also *tanzen* (quilted jackets), linings, bed-covers, and floor-cushions. Typically meisen were patterned cloths employing the *ikat* aesthetic - brought to Japan through gentle cultural assimilation of Indian, and Southeast Asian traditions. These 'splash-patterned' fabrics were born of labour-intensive and complex pattern binding of warp and/or weft threads before dyeing and weaving, resulting in sophisticated woven designs. Early on, meisen patterns were relatively simple, typically employing motifs of stripes, crosses or arrow fletching. The trend in the early 1900's for increasing complexity and diversity of designs, led to the development of the 'hogushi-ori' technique. Combined with timely developments in the mechanized spinning and weaving of silk to create good quality, durable fabric, this revolutionized patterned cloth production. Once expensive and rare, richly patterned cloth was now available to all and silk kimono was democratized.

The Karun Thakar Collection of meisen kimono is rich in the genre it represents. The selected pieces are usefully presented in groupings: abstract, perhaps the boldest, revealing influences of Cubism and Modernism with grand scale graphic strokes and geometric pattern; painterly, emphasising the freedom from the constraints of conventional pattern design; lines, in the form of ribbons, traditionally auspicious, magical and in dramatic, all-over patterns; traditional, with the interpretation of established motifs, in huge scale and placed in jarring repeats and unconventional composition; and flowers, manipulated and modernised forms of popular auspicious floral motifs. Production is rich and generous with valuable pairings of long view and close-up details of pieces, while the essay by Anna Jackson, Keeper of the East Asian Department, Victoria and Albert Museum, provides engaging insight into the origins and development of meisen in the context of broader Japanese culture.

The connoisseur of traditional kimono may feel uneasy with the bold, sometimes garish or gauche vocabulary of meisen. But representing a significant group both inside and outside this culture, this title is a worthy consideration for those interested in the power and scope of textile design.