Anais do Museu Paulista: História e Cultura Material
ISSN: 0101-4714
ISSN: 1982-0267
Museu Paulista, Universidade de São Paulo

LUU, SOPHIA; MCKINNEY, ELLEN
Kimono: elucidating meanings of Japanese textile artifacts for a museum audience
Anais do Museu Paulista: História e Cultura Material, vol. 29, e9, 2021
Museu Paulista, Universidade de São Paulo

DOI: 10.1590/1982-02672021v29e9

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=27365965008

Kimono: elucidating meanings of Japanese textile artifacts for a museum audience

https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-02672021v29e9

SOPHIA LUU[1]

http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2796-9308

Iowa State University / Ames, Iowa, United States

ELLEN MCKINNEY[2]

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2836-8902

Iowa State University / Ames, Iowa, United States

1. Student in Apparel, Merchandising, and Design at Iowa State University. *E-mail*: <sophialuu01@gmail.com>.

2. Associate Professor in the Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University. *Email*: <emckinne@iastate.edu>.

ABSTRACT: The objective of this research was to create museum texts and educational materials for a textiles section of a major year-long university museum exhibit focused on exploring Japanese culture and aesthetics through works of fine and applied art. Little background information about the textiles was available. A sample of historical Japanese kimono, yukata, and obi in a university collection was examined using material culture and semiotics research methods. The motifs present in the textiles were identified and explored for how the motifs represent values relevant to Japanese cultural practices throughout time. In particular, motifs were analyzed for their noted conveyance of a society's religious and cultural values. Motifs were predominantly botanical, emphasizing the respect for nature within Japanese culture. Other motif categories present included geometric, animals/insects, cultural/everyday objects, and landscape motifs. 104 individual motifs were identified. Symbolic meanings were examined and interpreted alongside present materials, colors, and techniques. The use of material culture and semiotics research methods for analyzing Japanese textiles is mapped in this study.

KEYWORDS: Japanese textiles. Material Culture. Semiotics. Textiles curation. Museum Programming. Kimono.

RESUMO: O objetivo desta pesquisa foi criar textos de museus e materiais educacionais para a seção têxtil de uma grande exposição de um museu universitário de um ano, focada em explorar a cultura e a estética japonesas por meio de obras de arte aplicada e fina. Poucas informações sobre os têxteis estavam disponíveis. Uma amostra do histórico quimono japonês, yukata e obi, em uma coleção universitária foi examinada usando métodos de pesquisa em cultura material e semiótica. Os motivos presentes nos têxteis foram identificados e explorados pela forma como eles representam valores relevantes para as práticas culturais japonesas ao longo do tempo. Em particular, os motivos foram explorados por sua atração notável pelos valores religiosos e culturais de uma sociedade. Os motivos eram predominantemente botânicos, enfatizando o respeito pela natureza na cultura japonesa. Outras categorias de motivos presentes incluem elementos geométricos, animais/insetos, objetos culturais/cotidianos e motivos de paisagem. Foram identificados 104 motivos individuais. Os significados simbólicos foram examinados e interpretados juntamente com materiais, cores e técnicas atuais. O uso de métodos de pesquisa em cultura e semiótica de materiais para análise de têxteis japoneses é mapeado neste estudo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Têxteis japoneses. Cultura material. Semiótica. Curadoria de têxteis. Programação de museus. Quimono.

INTRODUCTION

Dress communicates ideas about an individual's self that mirror time and society. One's identity may be revealed through body modification, supplements, and often most explicitly, through apparel. Prown posits "a high correlation between clothing and personal identity and values," since individuals take clothing criticism personally.[3] While Western culture has had a host of silhouettes and styles, the Japanese kimono stands out with its seeming immortality. The kimono's earliest ancestor was developed during the 8th century, and because of its longevity, it heralds as the National Dress of Japan.[4] While simple in silhouette, the kimono conveys a multitude of meanings through sleeve length, silhouette, and shape; fashioning of obi and necklines; color; and motif selection and placement. In Japan, the variety of colors, materials, techniques, and motifs used in their traditional garments, more so than varied cut and construction, indicate gender, class, status, and the current zeitgeist.[5] Motifs in kimono and obi often have auspicious significance coming from religious and popular beliefs and allude to an individual's virtues, reflect emotions, and demonstrate season or occasion.[6]

A university museum's exhibit of Japanese works of fine and applied art, including textiles, was the impetus for this study. The exhibit—Contemplate Japan—encouraged viewers to understand Japanese culture and aesthetics through the exhibited artifacts. In this study, material culture analysis[7] and semiotics were used to analyze the kimono and obi selected for exhibition and elucidate their meanings found in their motifs.

The kimono is a traditional Japanese robe-like garment comprised of four panels sewn together into a T-shape.[8] An obi is a sash-like belt worn with a kimono.[9] Crests, *mon*, are family emblems whose presence on kimono denotes levels of formality in Japanese dress.[10] While the university had a variety of kimono in the collection to display, little contextual information was known about each kimono or obi. The lack of information produced a deficiency in educational material for museum attendees to consume. Research uncovered the meaning of the motifs in each artifact. Findings were integrated into object labels and information presented in a walking tour for the public. This study demonstrates the usefulness of material culture and semiotics research methods in revealing a country's arts heritage and culture found in clothing and textiles.

3. Prown (1982, p. 13).

4. Dalby (2001).

5. Jackson (2015).

6. *Ibid*.

7. Prown, *op. cit*.

8. Richman-Abdou (2017).

9. *Ibid*.

10. Dower (1971).

BACKGROUND

"Contemplate Japan" was the major exhibit of the main university museum for 2020. The goal of the exhibit was to help viewers appreciate Japanese aesthetics and better understand the country's artistic influence on arts in the West. The year-long exhibit filled the entire museum and included a curation of Japanese prints, bamboo baskets, ikebana floral arrangements, ceramics, contemporary sculpture, and kimono from several collections on campus, as well as works loaned specifically for the exhibit. The head curator of the main University Museum coordinated all aspects of the exhibit. A series of programs were planned in the museum to help viewers engage with the artifacts. Programs related to specific categories (e.g., ceramics) as well as to the exhibit as a whole. Kimono and obi were drawn from the Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University's collection and are the focus of this study. A program related to these textiles was planned and presented.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While kimonos were available to display, there was little contextual information available. Available data included names of donors, date of donation, and limited information inferred or told to past archivists of the university's museum. Donors were inaccessible as they were either unknown, deceased, or unavailable. The age of the objects was mainly categorized according to which century they were thought to be produced. Most objects were noted to have been created before a certain date in the 20th century, but it was uncertain how old the items exactly were. Description of the artifacts included general identification of a few surface motifs such as an identifiable insect or cultural object like a scroll, but especially for nature motifs, such as flowers, there was no further specificity. Past curators noted some information about the intended wearer of the kimono, such as their certain gender, age, or occasion. For example, some kimonos were denoted to be for a bride or to be women's mourning apparel based on sleeve shape and length, motif combinations, color combinations, and the number of crests present. Regarding the meaning of the symbols depicted, more well-known objects were accounted for, such as a white crane. Crests were accounted for and briefly discussed with their purpose of imparting formality. The information provided by past curators was not accompanied by research support, date information was added, or by whom.

Further specification of plants and cultural objects was needed to understand the cultural meanings intended by the maker. After that initial identification, why the motifs may have been included and why they are relevant to Japanese design and culture was desired to fulfill the exhibit's purpose of helping viewers appreciate Japanese aesthetics and better understand the country's artistic influence on arts in the West. This information was desired to provide a thorough and holistic description of the artifacts to museum audiences. Thus, a research project was started.

11. Prown, *op. cit.* (p. 1).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Deely (1990).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

18. *Ibid.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Material culture and semiotics

Scholar Jules Prown defined material culture as "the study through artifacts of the beliefs-values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time."[11] Prown notes in his 1989 article, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," that the type of material culture approach he discusses is, to an extent, structuralist, as it has as "its premise that the configurations or properties of an artifact correspond to patterns in the mind of an individual producer or producers and the society of which he or they were a part."[12] The structuralist approach of material culture also takes, as a basic position, that man makes sense of the world not only through language, but also through the design of objects.[13] Prown posits that semiotics is related to material culture as semiotics takes the position that "artifacts transmit signals which elucidate mental patterns or structures."[14] Thus, semiotics explains the process of understanding the forestated cultural cause, or message, conveyed by an object in Prown's structuralist, material culture methodology.

Semiotics' role in material culture studies is debated. American philosopher and semiotician John Deely discusses the controversy of semiotics as a method or point of view in his 1990 work, *Basics of Semiotics*.[15] Deely notes that traditionally European contexts have overseen developments in semiotics from literary and linguistic perspectives,[16] but Deely advocates for a more holistic view of the theory as a point of view central to a much wider variety of disciplines.[17] According to Deely, this centrality has been overlooked by modern philosophy, and that it is "the perspective common to all of them that guided their search to begin with."[18] Deely expands in stating that "semiotics rather depends upon the maintaining of a point of view, which is not only transdisciplinary but is also … presupposed to… and compatible with every

method."[19] Thus, semiotics is a transcendent point of view, and Prown has applied this point of view to a structuralist methodology of material culture.

In more recent years, British scholars anthropologist Daniel Miller and design historian Judy Attfield have emphasized new models regarding material culture's relation to semiotics. Additionally, they promote a new genre of investigating dress/textile material culture that focuses on the sensorial wearing experience and the object-subject relationship. Miller's framework situates semiotics as a methodology most suited to linguistics and that its position in material culture is one of complexity. Miller notes, "… material culture was significantly enhanced by the arrival of this semiotic perspective; but ultimately it became as much a limitation as an asset."[20] Miller's viewpoint eschews linguistic-oriented semiotic thinking in preference of a more archaeological analysis of material. Physical qualities are most focused upon, and in the study of clothing, exploring the sensorial experience of different styles and materials is especially emphasized as a mode of material culture methodology.[21] In Attfield's *Wild Things: The material culture of everyday life*, the role of semiotics in material culture is also noted, paradoxically, as a positive and negative influence in material culture.[22] Attfield notes, "just as semiotics has done so much to increase our knowledge of visual culture, the non-verbal nature of the material world referred to in this project cannot entirely be explained through language."[23] This viewpoint reminds scholars that "concentrating exclusively on trying to decipher what an object means detracts from an understanding of its materiality."[24] Here, materiality seems to suggest "the physical thingness" of an artifact, and Attfield notes that it must not be forgotten in favor of its "visual imagery."[25] In sum, these scholars concede to semiotics' utility, but emphasize that an investigation of the object-subject relationship must be principally remembered if a material culture practice is intended to revolve around the "thing" and its interaction with people, rather than just the image and its hypothesized correlation with the culture of a society.

Similar to Miller and Attfield, the work of scholars Arjun Appaudurai and Timothy Ingold resonate with an approach to material culture that places the object at the center of investigation, considering both its physical properties and the meaning imparted by its social circulation. Appadurai notes that approaching things "by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with… does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things."[26] Meaning, according to Ingold, objects are considered "active not because they are imbued with agency but because of ways they are caught up in these currents of the lifeworld."[27] Social circulation is emphasized and explored through the physical wear and weathering of material. Similar to Attfield, Ingold calls for a clarification of what materiality means in the context of material

19. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

20. Miller (2010, p. 12).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 23-24.

22. Attfield (2000, p. 15).

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Appadurai (1986, p. 5).

27. Ingold (2007, p. 1).

culture, and that it should be the object itself, in its physical form and all its properties.[28] In sum, these philosophies resonate with a more anthropological approach to material culture that encourages a renewed emphasis on "thingness."

Relevant to both structuralist and more anthropological-based methodologies is determinism—the idea that "every effect observable in or induced by the object has a cause."[29] Determinism supports the idea that by studying artifacts, the underlying cultural cause of the design of the object can be understood. While relevant to both methodologies, the differences of the methodologies may result in different conclusions. Lou Taylor's multi-disciplinary approaches to dress history coincides with the deterministic viewpoint. Taylor describes that the practice of curators and conservators utilizes object-based research that "focuses necessarily and unapologetically on examination of the details of clothing and fabric."[30] While academic thought has valued insight on consumption of dress "based on the recognition of distinct systems of provision across commodities,"[31] Taylor argues that this insight would be impossible to discern without the intense study of the details of the material.[32]

In this study, the interpreted textiles were part of a museum collection, with little known information about their owners, thus material culture methodologies focusing on the object-subject relationship were less applicable. By contrast, the focus of the exhibit was to provide viewers understanding of aspects of Japanese culture as presented through the aesthetic appearance of artifacts in the museum's collection. Thus, motifs in textiles were particularly investigated as signs, using semiotics with material culture, reflective of the philosophies of Deely and Prown. Semiotics was adopted as a transdisciplinary viewpoint in the context of a structuralist material culture methodology. While the limitations of semiotics to material culture analysis are understood, it was deemed the most appropriate methodology for the purposes of this exhibit. Below, material culture and semiotics will be further discussed in their use of interpreting textile artifacts.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

29. Prown, *op. cit.* (p. 6).

30. Taylor (1998, p. 347).

31. Fine and Leopold (1993) apud Taylor (1998, p. 348).

32. Taylor, *op. cit.* (p. 348).

33. Areo and Kalilu (2013).

USE OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND SEMIOTICS IN INTERPRETING TEXTILE ARTIFACTS

Approaches to using material culture methodology and semiotics in studying and interpreting textile artifacts reflect the variety of material culture philosophies, each appropriate to its context and purposes. To understand the deeply religious culture of the Yoruba, Areo and Kalilu used semiotics to trace the origin and meaning of symbols used in Adire, the patterned, indigo-dyed textile of the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria.[33] This study more closely aligned with Prown's structuralist

material culture approach. For example, the dot motif was analyzed. Besides its role as a surface decoration, the dot was found to represent stars in Yoruba culture, which further represent human souls on earth.[34] When the star is no longer observed, a human soul is believed to have died.[35] Accordingly, the dot represents "transformation and transcendence of worldly entities with other worldly forces."[36] This star-like connotation also connects back to the dot's messages of light and blessing.[37] Thus, the dot is connected to "spiritual points of brightness, and symbols of the rebirth and transformation of a human soul."[38] The symbolism of the dot as revealed by semiotic analysis furthered understanding of Yoruba culture. This approach to understanding the meaning of symbols present in a textile, influenced the methodology of the current study, using semiotics to understand the meaning behind symbols found in Japanese kimono and obi.

Material and structure of cloth, in addition to textile motifs, may communicate cultural meanings. Kruger notes that anthropologists have used cloth to trace the history of a culture by taking a semiotics approach in analyzing the cloth's fiber, pattern, dye, and method of production.[39] Accordingly, Tibbs used material culture and semiotics to understand social cues related to clothing and textile production found in medieval Norse textiles.[40] By analyzing these textiles' material, patterns, and modes and locations of creation, an understanding of women's roles in medieval Europe was furthered, supporting the idea that textiles can lend to understanding past cultures.[41] Thus, in the current study, we also considered the meanings communicated by the fiber content, weave structure, and means of surface decoration in the cultural meaning of these textiles. These understandings enhanced our interpretation of the meaning of the symbols seen. For example, the silk content, jacquard structure, hand painting, and resist dyeing techniques evident communicated that the kimono was for a highly formal occasion. When combined with the observation of plum blossom and crane motifs, alongside a red color, and the long sleeve length, we deducted that the kimono was appropriate for a bride.

Regarding curating textiles for museum exhibitions, textile conservator Eastop supports the helpfulness of an understanding of material culture.[42] The results of her research show that an understanding of material culture benefits the curation and conservation of textiles in three main ways: (1) it promotes integrated thinking about the physical properties of objects and their social use (2) it clarifies that the "true nature" of objects evolves and is culturally determined, and (3) it facilitates discussion on how to investigate, preserve and present historical garments.[43] However, in contrast to Prown's more structuralist methodology, Eastop's study was driven by a "focus on the social role of things…[that] leads to analysis of the materials, technology, and circumstances of an object's making…, its use…, and its disposal."[44] In the realm of

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

39. Kruger (2001).

40. Tibbs (2012).

41. *Ibid.*

42. Eastop (2007).

43. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

material culture frameworks, Eastop's methodology is more anthropological and focused on social circulation rather than a structuralist framework more closely tied to semiotics, similar to Prown's methodology. Nonetheless, the usefulness of a material culture methodology in interpreting textile artifacts for a museum exhibit is supported.

Thus, by evidence of the reviewed literature and practices regarding material culture, semiotics, and textiles, we propose that material culture analysis can be useful for interpreting a curation of Japanese textile artifacts with little provenance to be presented in a museum exhibit. The material, physical properties inclusive of surface design techniques, styles, and materials of the garments were explored, but the primary emphasis was on investigating iconic representations and their meanings alongside these physical properties. A more structuralist methodology and semiotic viewpoint was deemed appropriate because of the primary focus on understanding the numerous iconic representations and the limited silhouette variations in the selected kimono.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE

Based on the literature review, the following research question was developed: How can material culture and semiotics be used to understand the meanings of symbols found in Japanese textiles selected from a university museum's collection? The purpose of this research was to examine a sample of Japanese textile artifacts in a university collection and explore how motifs represent values relevant to Japanese cultural practices throughout time. With this information, material was to be created for a museum exhibit that educates community members, students, and professors.

RESEARCH METHOD

A research method was developed to identify the specific motifs found in the Japanese textiles, their meanings, and context in Japanese culture. As recommended by Prown, the first step was object analysis.[45] The goal was to gather as much objective information about the artifact as possible. Next, an investigation of external evidence was pursued through a semiotic lens. The goal was to understand the meaning of the artifacts and, ultimately, to interpret these meanings to museum attendees.

45. Prown, *op. cit.*

46. *Ibid.*

SAMPLE

Ten to twelve artifacts were desired by the head curator of the Contemplate Japan exhibit. With this number in mind, the first step in this curation selection was studying a museum spreadsheet of the Japanese artifacts that had pictures of the artifacts, dates, and notes about the artifacts. The researchers preliminarily engaged with Prown's first step of object analysis, description analysis, to select their sample of traditional Japanese garments.[46] After this stage of initial analysis, the twenty-nine Japanese garments were individually removed from storage and examined. Each kimono and obi were laid on a large table, and the researchers circled the artifacts, noting details through gloved handling. Observation was conducted at varying distances to note details. For example, a distance of a few centimeters was needed to identify weave details and a few small embroidery designs, and a few hundred centimeters was necessary for spatial analysis of overall motif placement and relationships. Pictures were taken at different distances and angles and collected in shared folders for further analysis outside of the initial observation period. The selection was furthered with more specific documentation of artisan techniques and condition of the artifacts. Rips, stains, and overall structural integrity were analyzed. The final step in selection was comparing levels of assumed audience fascination. This was pursued by having a discussion among the researchers- two of whom had expertise in Japanese material culture and Japanese textile tradition. For the museum exhibit, a sample of nine kimono, and one yukata were selected alongside two obi (Figure 1).

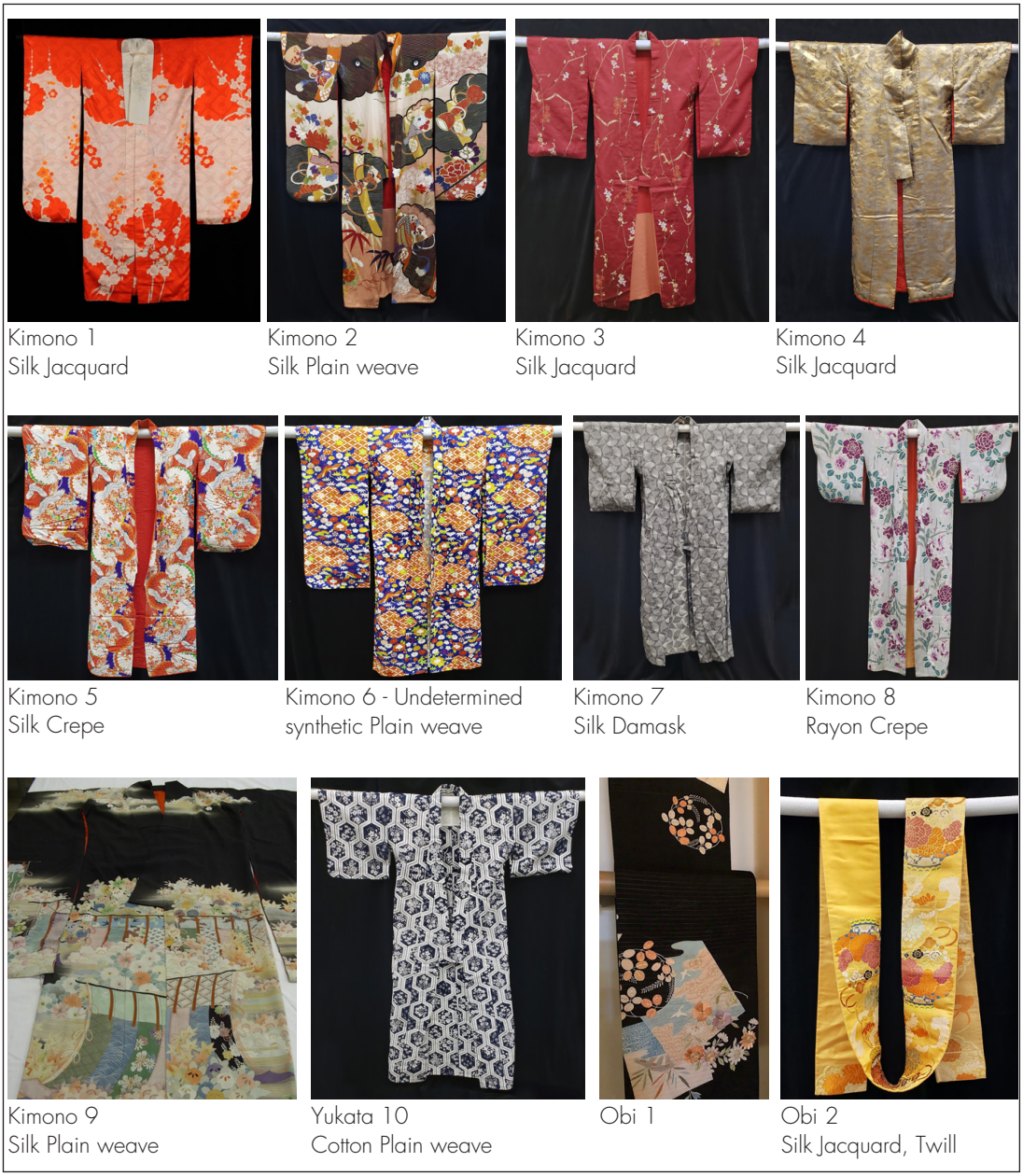

Figure 1 – Selected Japanese textile artifacts with fiber content and weave structure. Source: Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Object analysis

Prown's three-stage method was used to study the objects.[47] Phases included: (a) description, (b) deduction, and (c) speculation. For this study, the *description* stage was most important, as the overarching goal was to understand the meaning of motifs present in the textiles.

Description. In the description stage, observations about each textile artifact were observed and recorded. This was an initial description stage where the "largest, most comprehensive observations" were made.[48] This included (a) *substance* such as fiber content, fabric structure, surface design techniques; (b) *content* or subject matter of motifs present; and (c) *form* such as color, texture, and how they interact with motifs, and overall motif placement. The fabric and surface design techniques of the kimono were investigated, moreso than techniques of clothing construction, because of the curatorial choice of the overall exhibition to emphasize aesthetics. Also, the construction of the kimono were found to be relatively similar because of the repeated kimono silhouette.

Substantial description was done by taking measurements, identifying weave structure, fiber content, present surface design techniques, the ground color of the artifact, and defining the sleeve style (round or rigid corner). The presence and number of crests were also determined at this stage. For the garment measurements, the center back length, sleeve length, total wingspan, and hem circumference were collected. Fiber content, weave structure, and surface design were identified through visual analysis. Microscopic analysis was not necessary to identify these elements. While microscopy would have yielded additional information about the textiles, such as yarn count or fiber structure, visual analysis provided adequate substantial description to interpret the depicted motifs and their meanings through semiotics. Yang and Narasin's *Textile Art of Japan* was also consulted to help identify certain weave structures and textile design techniques.[49]

For the second part of the description stage, motifs were identified in the sample of Japanese garments. Crests' motifs were also included in the overall count. Documents, known as *callout sheets*, were created in Adobe Illustrator for each artifact to call out individual motifs to aid semiotics research outside of primary observation periods. Figure 2 illustrates a callout sheet for Kimono 2. Bringing together evidence from substance and content analysis, the researchers engaged with the formal analysis stage, the third step of the description stage of

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

49. Yang and Narasin (1989).

material culture analysis, as defined by Prown.[50] Formal analysis is defined as analyzing the object's visual character, first by its two-dimensional organization, then three-dimensional organization and integration with other formal foundations such as color, light, and texture.[51] This is the most holistic of the description steps as it notes the formal elements' patterns of distribution.[52] During this stage, the location of motifs (e.g., sleeve hem, whole body, bottom hem, etc.), accent colors, and the interaction between motif placement and accents were noted.

50. Prown, *op. cit.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

Figure 2 – Motif callout sheet for Kimono 2. Source: Callout sheet created by the author. Image – Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University

Deduction

In the deduction stage, the use of each textile artifact was considered. Clues gathered in the description stage lent to knowledge regarding the intended user, occasion, and level of formality for the textile artifact. Secondary sources such as Liza Dalby's *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* were consulted in understanding the meaning of substantial style details like sleeve shape, sleeve length, and full garment size.[53] A round sleeve shape indicates female use, while a rectangular sleeve shape indicates male use.[54] Sleeve length was analyzed for its significance in imparting age, formality, and gender.[55]

Regarding full garment size, each kimono's center back length, sleeve length, total wingspan, and hem circumference was measured during the description stage. The center back measurement was most focused on, with its connection to height. The knowledge that the kimono collection was primarily for adults guided analysis. Great variations in measurement, (nine inches or more difference in center back length) led to discrimination of outliers. These outliers were then additionally analyzed in relation to their motifs, color combinations, costliness of material in terms of fiber content and/or weave structure, and the number of surface decorations present. These details supported hypotheses based on the measurements that certain garments were intended for adolescents and children. Finally, crests were dwelt upon because of their formality impartation in Japan.[56] It was noted if garments had one, three, or five crests. With this information, secondary sources were consulted to understand the context of where kimonos with these certain number of crests would be worn. By engaging with these details, clues were found to support claims regarding the intended user, occasion, and level of formality for the textile artifact. Finding these details aided speculative analysis of the motifs in the next stages.

Speculation

In the speculation stage, evidence gathered in the descriptive and deductive stages was reviewed to formulate a research question and develop the method for answering this question. The main research question was what information about Japanese culture and aesthetics was conveyed by the motifs and colors used in the textile artifacts. Semiotic analysis of the motifs was pursued as the method for answering this question.

53. Dalby, *op. cit.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

56. *Ibid.*

Investigation of external evidence: semiotic analysis

The focus of the analysis was on the meanings of the motifs found in the textile artifacts. This choice was made due to the overall exhibit's emphasis on illuminating "the artistic and cultural developments emanating from Japan" and how they have influenced arts in the West, as set by the head curator.[57] The kimono and obi would be displayed among woodblock prints, bamboo baskets, ikebana floral arrangements, traditional Japanese dolls, ceramics, and contemporary sculpture. These other artifacts groups were selected by the head curator of the university art museum and were displayed and described because of their representation of Japanese design and aesthetics. Thus, it was deemed appropriate for this study to highlight symbolic meanings in the visual imagery rather than object-subject relationships. After primary observation and description of motifs present in the artifacts, motifs were identified and researched by browsing secondary sources such as websites and books cataloging Japanese design in order to discover what the motifs and colors conveyed about Japanese culture and aesthetics. Some resources included Merrily Baird's *Symbols of Japan: Thematic Motifs in Art and Design*;[58] John Dower's *The Elements of Japanese Design; a Handbook of Family Crests, Heraldry & Symbolism*;[59] and a certified *kitsuke* (the art of wearing a traditional Japanese garment) sensei's website *Ready, Set, Kimono*![60] When a motif could not be specified, it was listed under its appropriate category. For example, while a motif could be identified as a flower, sometimes the research still did not provide enough evidence to say which kind of flower it was.

A Japanese website with commentary on Japanese textile design- *Japanese Traditional Patterns and Colors*- was consulted for additional information about seasonal color associations.[61] Liza Dalby's Kimono: Fashioning Culture further aided speculative interpretation of the garments as a sum of their substantial characteristics, motifs, and formal qualities.[62]

Factors recorded in the object analysis[63] such as color, sleeve style, and measurements helped researchers to understand the context, and thereby meanings of motifs for the particular artifacts alongside discovered established historical and cultural associations of the motifs. These factors led to the conclusion that two kimono were for adolescent females, five kimono were for women, two kimono were for men, and that one yukata was for a man. Having this context further framed semiotic analysis of the motifs alongside historical/cultural associations provided by secondary sources. In another example, the presence of five crests meant that the kimono was of the highest formal wear in Japanese society, but the non-black ground color of the kimono and placement of motifs limited it from being

57. Iowa State University (2020).

58. Baird (2001).

59. Dower, *op. cit.*

60. Melissa (2016).

61. Iki-ya.com and Iki-ya.jp ([20-?]).

62. Dalby, *op. cit.*

63. Prown, *op. cit.*

the most formal dress. The knowledge of this formality level impacted the overall interpretation of the motifs in that textile artifact.

Education and distribution of findings

A 45-minute educational program for the general public was developed based on the findings. The program was organized as a walking tour of the exhibited kimono and obi. The text of the program was organized around each object spoken about during the tour. For each object, the meanings of present motifs in Japanese culture were explained. When a motif reappeared in another textile, it was pointed out but not explained again. A handout of motifs used in the textiles was prepared through manipulations on Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator (Figure 4) and copies provided to each tour participant on a clipboard. This allowed them to make notes about the motif meanings during the tour. Participants could take the handout home for future reference.

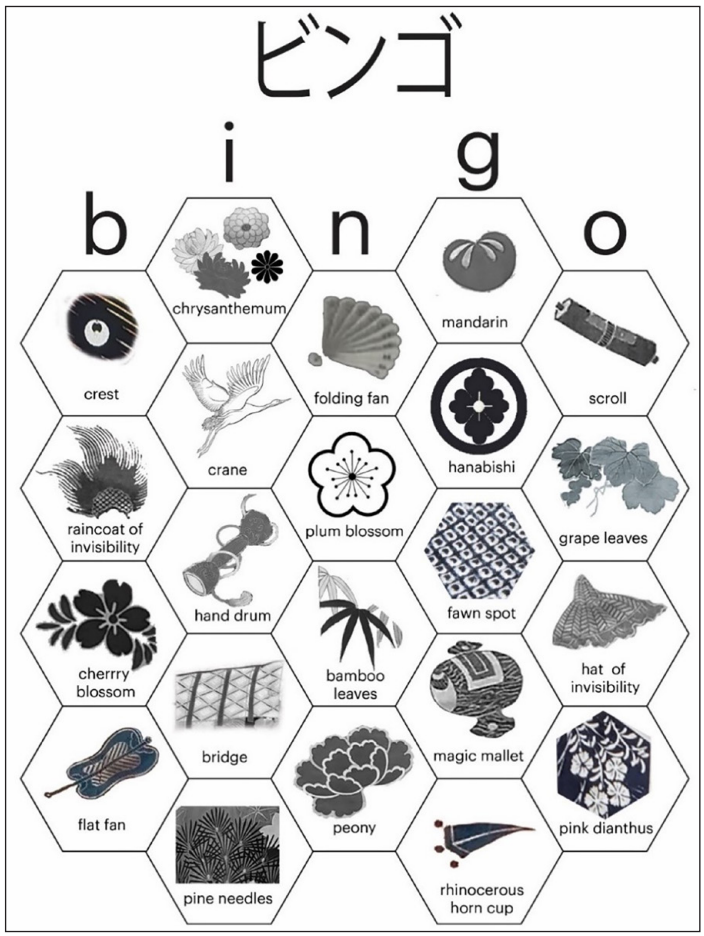

Figure 3 – Motif handout--Kikko Bingo Board.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Material culture and semiotics research methods were used in a multi-step process to provide an understanding of symbols found in Japanese textiles selected from a university museum's collection. Here we present the motifs found and how they represent values relevant to Japanese cultural practices throughout time. Additionally, the issue of inter and trans-cultural relations between Japan China is addressed as it was found as a common theme that many motifs originated from Chinese use. These results are disused in light of related literature. We also present the didactic labels created for the museum exhibit, based on the research findings and discuss the outcomes of the program presented, based on these findings.

Symbols and Meanings

Information attained from primary observation and consultation of secondary sources regarding motifs present in the Japanese textiles is presented. The motifs found in the Japanese textiles are discussed according to category. Kimono in which the motif appears are referenced. Motifs within five different categories were identified in the sample of Japanese garments. These categories include (1) Botanical (2) Geometric (3) Animals/Insects (4) Cultural/Everyday Objects and (5) Landscape Elements.

Most of the motifs found were in the botanical category, emphasizing the inherent respect in Japanese culture for nature.[64] The garments varied in showing one motif or a grouping of many. Also, the garments varied in their visual organization. Motifs decorated the bottom hems, sleeves, collars, and full body of the garment. Some were repeat patterns, while other kimono demonstrated purposeful placement on only certain areas by free-hand techniques. Regarding color, great variety was seen throughout the garments. The most popular ground color was red, which was seen on three kimono. Red is also cited as possibly the most popular kimono color by Jackson.[65] Salmon, gold, light blue, dark blue, indigo, gray, and black comprised the other ground colors. A range of 55 separate accent colors were noted. Two kimono and yukata had two colors on the main body of the fabric. The seven other kimono had at least three to eleven different colors, not including hues from gradation effects. Each kimono had fairly even patterns of distribution of the separate colors. With most of the kimono having a silk and synthetic fiber content, the colors had great vibrancy. Observed textile techniques included free-hand paste resist-dyeing, stencil resist-dyeing, hand embroidery, indigo dyeing, and direct printing.

64. Gunter (1999).

65. Jackson, *op. cit.*

66. Baird (2001).

Many motifs were also found to originate from China in connection to folklore and religion transmitted to Japan because of Chinese expansion and contact with Japanese society.[66] Thus, the kimono displayed one case of how interactions between cultures shape the meaning of symbols. The material culture analysis helped to show that cultural meanings are often not independent, but rather influenced by other global actors.

In order to better understand the meaning of motifs with each individual kimono, substantial evidence (physical inventory), most prevalent motifs, and formal qualities were considered. Then, an explanation for the motif's role in Japanese society was identified based on the accumulated observations and research (Table 1).

	Substantial Evidence Surface Design Techniques					Motifs				
Artifact	Indigo Dyeing	Direct Print	Stencil Resist Dye	Freehand Past Resist	Embroidery	Geometric	Botanical	Animals/ Insects	Cultural/ Everyday Objects	Landscape
Kimono 1				X	X	2	2	1	0	1
Kimono 2			X	X	X	5	12	1	2	2
Kimono 3						0	1	0	0	0
Kimono 4					X (crests)	2	2	0	9	0
Kimono 5		X				3	5	1	2	0
Kimono 6		X				0	10	1	3	1
Kimono 7						0	0	0	1	0
Kimono 8				X		0	4	0	0	0
Kimono 9				X	X	1	6	0	0	3
Yukata 10	X		X			1	7	0	0	1
Obi 1				X	X	0	5	0	0	1
Obi 2						0	3	0	1	0
Total	1	2	2	4	5	14	58	4	19	9

Table 1 – Research Results: Substantial Evidence and Motifs. Note: for Surface Design Techniques, X = presence; for Motifs, the number indicates number of different motifs present.

GEOMETRIC DESIGN

67. Yang; Narasin (1989).

68. *Ibid*.

For geometric motifs (Table 2), the *kanoko* fawn spot design was most prevalent with four examples. Next was the *kikko* hexagonal tortoiseshell design with three examples each. Other geometric motifs include a *shippo* (overlapping circles), stenciled thin stripes, *uroko* triangle pattern, paisley, hard angled lines, and swirling line designs.

Artifact	Kanoko	Kikko	Shippo	Large Diamond	Interlocked Rectangles	Thin stripes	Paisley	Uroko
Kimono 1	X			X				
Kimono 2	X	X	X		X	X		
Kimono 4		X	X					
Kimono 5	X						X	X
Kimono 9	X							
Yukata 10		X						
Total(14)	4	3	2	1	1	1	1	1

Table 2 – Research Results: Geometric Motifs.

Kanoko

Kanoko, translated literally to deer child, is a popular *shibori* (traditional Japanese resist dyeing) technique in Japan.[67] To create the *kanoko* design through the *shibori* technique, a string is bound around multiple small sections of the fabric. The fabric is dyed, and once the string is removed, a dotted resist design is created.[68] There are varieties of *kanoko* based on differing binding techniques and overall appearance. This pattern resembles deer spots and is often recreated through other media. *Kanoko* was demonstrated in Kimono 1, 2, 5, and 9 through weaving and *shibori* techniques.

Kikko

Kikko is an interlocking, hexagonal pattern design. This pattern is said to resemble a tortoiseshell.[69] With this semblance, the *kikko* pattern denotes the value of longevity.[70] *Bishamon Kikko*, one variation of *kikko*, was also seen in the kimono selection on Kimono 2.[71] This pattern comes from the armor pattern of the Buddhist god known as *Bishamonten* in Japan.[72] He is the war god, considered to be one of the Seven Gods of Good Luck, and associated with authority in Japan.[73] The *kikko* pattern is on Kimono 2, 4, and Yukata 10.

Shippo

Shippo refers to the seven treasures of Buddhism.[74] These are gold, silver, lapiz lazuli, crystal, pearl, coral, and agate.[75] In this design, circles overlap in an infinitely repeating pattern. This design also refers to the cloisonné craft technique where glass enamels are applied on ceramic or metal surfaces.[76] In Buddhist kingship, rulers are encouraged to give contributions made from these materials as a sign of reverence and to gain merit.[77] *Shippo* appeared in Kimono 2 and 4.

Botanical

Botanical motifs occurred in the sample 58 times (Table 3). In this selection, chrysanthemums (10 examples present) and plum blossoms (9 examples present) were the most prevalent motifs. Other prevalent motifs included peonies (5), bamboo leaves (4), *hanabishi* (3), and mandarins (3). All other motifs in the botanical category were identified two or fewer times. The clematis, maple leaf, paulownia, and pine were each identified twice. The cherry blossom, while extremely popular in kimono design, was identified once in this garment selection. A few were still unidentified flowers. In this study, the chrysanthemum, plum blossom, peony, bamboo leaves, *hanabishi*, and mandarins will be discussed with their prominence in the curation. The cherry blossom and pine will additionally be discussed with their popularity in Japanese textile design overall.

69. Baird, *op. cit.*

70. *Ibid.*

71. Matsuyama (2017).

72. *Ibid.*

73. Indianapolis Museum of Art (2020).

74. Matsuyama, *op. cit.*

75. Wong (2018).

76. The Imperial Household Agency (2004).

77. Wong, *op. cit.*

Artifact	Chrysanthemum (A)/Chrysanthemum Variant (B)	Plum Blossom (A) /Plum Blossom Variant (B)	Peony	Bamboo Leaves	Hanabishi (A) / Hanabishi Variant (B)	Mandarins	Paulownia	Pine	Bellflower	Clematis	Maple Leaf	Bush Clover	Unidentified Flower or Leaf	Other
Kimono 1		A		X										
Kimono 2	A, B	A, B	X	X	A	X	X	X						Gardenia, Grape leaves
Kimono 3		A												
Kimono 4	A		X											
Kimono 5	A, B	A	X			X								
Kimono 6	A	A		X	A, B			X	X	X			X	Cherry Blossom
Kimono 8			X									X	X (4)	
Kimono 9	A	A				X	X			X	X			
Yukata 10	A	A								X	X		X (2)	Pink Dianthus
Obi1	A			X					X			X		Carnation
Obi 2	A	A	X											
Total	10	9	5	4	3	3	2	1	2	3	2	2	7	5

Table 3 – Research Results: Botanical Motifs.

Chrysanthemum

The chrysanthemum's place in Japanese culture comes from its initial importance in China.[78] Besides an appreciation of its beauty and elegance, chrysanthemums held Chinese fascination because of its healing properties, which were said to help with drunkenness, nervous conditions, and general frailty.[79] They additionally represented endurance, integrity, and reclusion, and were associated with Taoists, poets, and scholars who had retreated in the mountains.[80] Chrysanthemums were first introduced to Japan during the pre-Nara period (pre 710 A.D.).[81] Chrysanthemums were present in Kimono 2 (two variations), 4, 5 (two variations), 6, 9, Yukata 10, Obi 1, and Obi 2.

Plum blossom

Plum blossoms are associated with longevity and celebrated for its scent, blossoms, and being the first flower of spring.[82] It used to be the most featured flower in Japanese poetry, but this changed during the Heian era when a fascination with the transience of life developed.[83] While the plum blossom has associations with different topics, one topic is its association with the loss of a woman's virginity.[84] Plum blossoms appeared in Kimono 1, 2 (two variations), 3, 5, 6, 9, Yukata 10, and Obi 2.

The plum blossom's appearance on Kimono 1, which was a red *uchikake*, along with white cranes, supported its symbolic meaning imparting longevity.

Peony

Peonies were the third most observed motif in the research sample. These flowers were initially introduced to Japan from China during the Nara period (710-794 A.D.), but they did not gain societal aesthetic appreciation until the Edo period.[85] They have a Spring/Summer association and are known as the king of flowers.[86] They are considered the most appropriate floral offering for Buddha.[87] Peonies appeared in Kimono 2, 4, 5, 8, and Obi 2.

Bamboo leaves

Bamboo leaves are known as *sasanoha* in Japanese.[88] Take (the stalk) is used for practical, decorative, and celebratory applications.[89] Symbolically, they

78. Baird, *op. cit.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*; Columbia University (2020).

82. Baird, *op. cit.*

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. Melissa (2016).

87. Baird, *op. cit.*

88. Melissa (2016).

89. *Ibid.*

represent the Taoist idea of emptiness and are associated with cultured gentlemen.[90] Bamboo is part of the motif grouping "Three Friends of Winter," which also includes the pine and plum.[91] Bamboo leaves appeared in Kimono 1, 2, 6, and Obi 1.

Hanabishi

Hanabishi are stylized 4-petaled flowers usually seen in a diamond shape.[92] They come from China and are one of the earliest used floral motifs.[93] It remains important as primary or background design.[94] *Hanabishi* appeared in Kimono 2 and 6 (two variations).

Mandarin

The mandarin was brought to Japan from China during the 3rd century.[95] It was admired for its lush aesthetic with its shiny green leaves, fragrant blossoms, and plump fruit.[96] Often, it is paired with the cherry tree and displayed among the formal dolls during *Hinamatsuri*, the Girls' Festival in Japan.[97] Mandarins appeared in Kimono 2, 5, and 9 alongside many other botanical motifs.

Cherry blossom

Cherry blossoms are a native flower to Japan and are honored for their brief blooming time and fragility of its blossoms.[98] As a flower motif, it is identified by its five notched petals. Originally, plum blossom used to be the most celebrated flower in the Japanese poetry canon, but during the Heian era (794-1185 A.D.), a more native sensibility developed along with a heightened appreciation for the transience of life (strengthened by Buddhist preoccupation) making the cherry blossom the most beloved flower.[99] The falling of the cherry blossoms became a metaphor for a warrior killed early in life.[100] Cherry blossoms appear in Kimono 2.

Pine

Matsu is Japanese for pine.[101] The pine occurs naturally in Japan is honored for its attractiveness and practicality, but its placement in design originates from the Chinese

90. Gunter, *op. cit.*

91. Baird, *op. cit.*; Dalby, *op. cit.*

92. Baird, *op. cit.*

93. *Ibid.*

94. *Ibid.*

95. Dower, *op. cit.*

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*

98. Baird, *op. cit.*

99. *Ibid.*; Columbia University (2020).

100. Dower, *op. cit.*

101. Baird, *op. cit.*

art tradition.[102] The pine's status as an evergreen led to its association with the values of good fortune, longevity, and steadfastness.[103] In Japan and China, it is considered to be a virtuous plant, a Winter and New Year symbol, and the premier symbol of long life.[104] Pine needles and boughs appeared in Kimono 2 and 6, respectively.

102. *Ibid*.

103. *Ibid*.

104. *Ibid*.

105. *Ibid*.

106. Gunter, *op. cit*.

107. Baird, *op. cit*.

108. Dower, *op. cit*.

109. Columbia University (2020).

ANIMALS/INSECTS

There were limited motifs from the Animals/Insects category (Table 4). Three cranes and one butterfly motif were present in the selected curation.

Artifact	Crane	Butterfly
Kimono 1	X	
Kimono 2		X
Kimono 5	X	
Kimono 6	X	
Total (4)	3	1

Table 4 – Research Results: Animals/Insects Motifs.

Crane

There were three white crane examples present in the curation. *Tsuru*, cranes, are one of the foremost symbols of longevity and good fortune in East Asia.[105] In the Chinese tradition, cranes are thought to be able to move between heaven and earth for more than two thousand years.[106] They are most frequently seen in fine and applied art and are closely associated with New Year and marriage ceremonies—events symbolic to new life.[107] Cranes appeared in Kimono 1, 5, and 6.

Butterfly

There was one butterfly example present in the curation. Among Japanese aristocrats, butterflies were often desired as a family crest because of their elegance.[108] They came into popularity as early as the Nara period (710-814 A.D).[109] Before the time of Japanese heraldry, warriors used butterflies as a symbol

on their armor to represent a more sensitive side of themselves that was susceptible to the grace of courtly society.[110] Butterflies were present on Kimono 2's crests.

110. Dower, *op. cit.*

111. Baird, *op. cit.*

Cultural/Everyday Objects

For the Cultural/Everyday Objects (Table 5), variants of a fan motif were the most present examples (4 examples present). Other objects mainly came from the Myriad Treasures lore—items associated with the Seven Gods of Good Luck and said to ensure prosperity, long life, and general good fortune of Japan.[111] The traditional Japanese *tsuzumi* drum was additionally present.

Artifact	Sensu Fan	Uchiwa Fan	Myriad Treasures	Tsuzumi Drum	Cords (A) / Cord and Tassel(B)
Kimono 2	X			X	
Kimono 4		X	X Hat of Invisibility Magic Mallet Purse of Inexhaustible Riches Raincoat of Invisibility Rhinoceros horn cup Scroll Weight Wish Granting Gem		
Kimono 5	X				A
Kimono 6			Magic Mallet Purse of Inexhaustible Riches Scroll		
Kimono 7	X				
Obi 2					B
Total (19)	4	1	11	1	2

Table 5 – Research Results: Cultural/Everyday Object Motifs.

Fans

Two types of fans motifs were noted in the kimono, *sensu* and *uchiwa*. *Sensu* are folding fans that originated from Japan.[112] The *sensu* dates to the Heian period (794-1185) but were most popular during the Edo period (1600-1867) on kimono, ceramics, lacquer, and screens.[113] In Japanese design, scattered *sensu* were known as *senmen chirashi*. Large *sensu* served to integrate smaller themes into a larger design.[114] *Sensu* fans appeared in Kimono 2, 5, and 7. Kimono 2 utilized the *sensu* as a way of incorporating other motifs, and Kimono 7's damask pattern incorporated *senmen chirashi* throughout the body of the kimono.

The flat uchiwa fan originates from China and is lobe-shaped with a central spine.[115] It was most popular during the Heian period (794-1185).[116] In art, the lobed *uchiwa* is popular in connection with religious figures, including several of the Seven Gods of Good Luck, and Chinese figures, such as the folklore character Rosei.[117] The *uchiwa* appeared in Kimono 4 as part of the Myriad Treasures.

Myriad Treasures

The Myriad Treasures are a group of auspicious items associated with the Seven Gods of Good Luck who carry them in a sack.[118] These items are from categories including natural items, imaginary symbols of good fortune, practical items, and objects representing the cultured life.[119] In the natural category, the rhinoceros horn cup is said to have protective qualities that revealed the presence of poisons.[120] For the imaginary symbols of good fortune, there is the hat and raincoat of invisibility, the purse of inexhaustible riches, magic mallet, and a wish-granting gem.[121] Regarding the hat and raincoat of invisibility, Taoists desired the power of invisibility as they believed it would aid them in navigating between heaven and earth.[122] A weight, *fundo*, represents a practical item.[123] The *uchiwa* fan and scroll represent cultured life.[124] These items are all said to ensure prosperity, long life, and general good fortune.[125] On Kimono 4, all treasures above were present. The luxurious, golden brocade design of the kimono further emphasized the Myriad Treasure symbolism. Kimono 6 featured the scroll, magic mallet, and purse of inexhaustible riches.

112. *Ibid*.

113. *Ibid*.; Columbia University (2020).

114. Baird, *op. cit*.

115. *Ibid*.

116. *Ibid*.

117. *Ibid*.

118. *Ibid*.

119. *Ibid*.

120. *Ibid*.

121. *Ibid*.

122. *Ibid*.

123. *Ibid*.

124. *Ibid*.

125. *Ibid*.

Drums

In Japan, the two most common drums are *taiko* (barrel-shaped) and the *tsuzumi* (barbell or hourglass).[126] *Taiko* drums are most popular, but *tsuzumi* drums are most often represented in crest designs because of their graceful shape and the elegant depiction possibilities with their trailing cords that attach the skin to the drum.[127] The *tsuzumi* drum and its swirling cords were present on Kimono 2.

126. *Ibid.*

127. *Ibid.*

128. *Ibid.*

129. Parent (2001).

130. Gunter, *op. cit.*

LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS

For Landscape Elements (Table 6), three examples each of water and clouds were the most present motifs. Other landscape elements included bridges (1), mountains (1), and wind. (1). The varying styles of water depiction will be discussed below.

Artifact	Scrolling Line Water	Seigaiha Water	Clouds	Bridge	Wind	Mountain
Kimono 1			X			
Kimono 2			X			X
Kimono 6			X			
Kimono 9	X	X		X		
Yukata 10					X	
Obi 1	X					
Total (9)	2	1	3	1	1	1

Table 6 – Research Results: Substantial Evidence and Motifs.

Water

Three popular types of water depiction in Japanese art include ararumi (rough waves), *seigaiha* (stacked waves of half circles), and scrolling lines, which indicate the water of rivers and ponds.[128] *Seigaiha* is said to specifically derive from the design of a costume used during ancient Japanese court dance.[129] While water is a common motif throughout Japanese art of all mediums, it is most often seen alongside other motifs with symbolic meanings.[130] In Kimono 9, *seigaiha* and scrolling lines were

present along bridges and botanical motifs like plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, maple leaves, and mandarins. Scrolling water was also present on Obi 1.

DIDACTIC LABELS

The didactic labels created for the exhibition combined the semiotic content analysis of motifs; the substantial characteristics of each artifact (fiber content, fabric structure, surface design techniques); formal, holistic analyses of the artifacts (inclusive of color, texture and how they interact with motifs, and overall motif placement), and overall what the combination of these elements impart about Japanese culture. Figures 4-15 include pictures of each artifact alongside their caption and didactic label.

Figure 4 – Kimono 1 (Uchikake), circa 1935. Silk jacquard, hand-painted and paste-resist dyed. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

This ornate kimono would be worn by a bride participating in a traditional Shinto wedding. During the ceremony, she would wear a white *shiromuku* kimono, signifying purity and cleanliness. Post ceremony, she would change into an *uchikake* that is often bright red and featuring motifs symbolic of good luck and good fortune. Plum blossoms, often associated with longevity and celebrated for its holistic aesthetic beauty, decorate the body of this *uchikake*. Embroidered cranes (the most commonly seen animal in Japanese art) float along the white collar. White cranes symbolize longevity and good fortune. The long sleeves of the uchikake are thought to bring good fortune in relationships and ward off evil. Once married, the woman will wear dramatically shorter sleeves for the rest of her life.

Figure 5 – Kimono 2 (Furisode), circa 1939. Silk, hand-painted and paste and stencil resist dyed with embroidered accents. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Representations of Japanese cultural objects twist around a multitude of plants filling this kimono. Flowers include cherry blossoms, chrysanthemum, clematis, and peonies. A painted mountain decorates the hemline while the *sensu* fan intermingles with the silk cords of a crest based on the Japanese handheld *tsuzumi* drum. Pine needles, mandarins, grape leaves, and bamboo leaves contribute to the overall composition. Stylized 4-petaled flowers in a diamond shape (known as *hanabishi*) are scattered throughout. The sleeve length hints at a younger, unmarried woman. Five small black crests, circles with butterfly motifs, notate formality based on their location across the garment's shoulders. With each plant having different seasonal associations and a complex color scheme, this kimono is a woman's four-season, year-round kimono. With the price of a kimono being extremely expensive, the seasonless quality is prudent for those wanting to participate in the kimono tradition.

Figure 6 – Kimono 3, circa 1950. Silk jacquard. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Golden and white *ume* blossoms are created through a jacquard weave. These symbols have been seen in Japan since the 8th century. This blossom used to be the most frequently mentioned flower in Japanese poetry. It was celebrated for being the first flower to bloom in spring, its fine scent, and dainty blossoms. During the Heian period (794-1185), the *ume* blossom became overshadowed by the *sakura* blossom as cultural values changed to a fascination with the transience of life. Ume is additionally associated with entrance exams and academic success in Japan. The Legend of the Flying Plum Tree (*Tobi Ume Densetsu*) is a myth focusing on *Sugawara no Michizane*, a well-known politician, poet, scholar, and student of Chinese literature during the Heian period, and his magical plum tree. These achievements led to him to be honored as the deity of scholarship in Shintoism. Temples dedicated to *Sugawara no Michizane* use the *ume* as their symbol. Japanese students go to these shrines to pray for luck every spring.

Figure 7 – Kimono 4, n.d. Silk jacquard. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Cultural symbols intermingled with nature are woven in this jacquard structure. The hexagonal shape seen throughout is known as the tortoiseshell pattern (*kikko-mon*) in Japan and was popularized in the Nara period (710-794). Peonies and chrysanthemums are placed in some of the hexagons, while objects such as an uchiwa fan, scroll, purse of inexhaustible riches, and rhinoceros horn cup layer on top. Three golden crests are embroidered across the back notating mid-level formality. The padded hem also contributes to its formality. The weight of the padding allows the kimono to drag on the floor in an appealing way.

Figure 8 – Kimono 5, mid-20th century. Silk crepe, direct print. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Animals, objects, plants, and geometric patterns fill the surface of this adolescent girl's kimono. Among the flowers are chrysanthemums, plum blossoms, and

cherry blossoms layered against larger, two-dimensional chrysanthemums. Mandarin fruit hides within the floral bouquets. Cranes with trailing cords fly throughout the kimono. *Kanoko*, a repeated diamond pattern with small white spots inside, is combined with *uroko*, a repeated triangle pattern. A direct printing technique creates vibrant colors and lowers costs—desirable in a garment for a younger wearer.

Figure 9 – Kimono 6, 1983. Synthetic, direct print. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Clouds and floral motifs are among the most broadly used elements in Japanese design as seen in this girl's kimono including chrysanthemum, cherry blossom, clematis, and plum blossoms. Hanabishi, a four-petaled flower in a diamond shape, is featured sporadically throughout kimono. This floral design is extremely common in the Japanese art tradition and recognizable with its stylized appearance and symmetry. Geometric diamond designs fill the clouds, which are

often seen in Japanese design for religious affiliation, as signs of divine authority, and as a pure decorative background motif. Cranes, bamboo leaves, and scrolls also fill the background of this festive girl's kimono.

Figure 10 – Kimono 7, n.d. Silk damask. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

The *sensu*, a ribbed, folding, fan, is represented in the overall pattern of this kimono. This style of fan originated in Japan and is often incorporated into family crests. In Japanese design, multiple fans form the scattered fan motif *senmen chirashi*. It is a symbol of respect, friendship, or future happiness. Boxed fans were presented

as New Year's gifts during the Edo period (1600-1868). Frequently, sensu are given as engagement gifts or presented to friends going on trips. An exclusive small folding fan is a requirement when invited to a traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

Figure 11 – Kimono 8 (Homongi), mid-20th century. Rayon crepe, free-hand resist dyed. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Botan (peony) became aesthetically relevant during the Edo period (1615-1868) but were initially introduced from China during the Nara period (710-794). They are the appropriate floral offering for the Buddha and are known as the king of flowers. *Hagi* (bush clover) is also featured in this design, and in classical times, were used as a

metaphor for the ephemerality of life. *Botan* is traditionally associated with early summer while *hagi* is associated with autumn. *Hagi* was the first of the Seven Grasses of Autumn mentioned in 8th century Manyoshu poetry. A homongi with a truncated, round sleeve suggests the kimono is for an adult woman for a semi-formal occasion.

Figure 12 – Kimono 9, mid-20th century. Silk, hand-painted and paste-resist dyed. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

In increasing levels, one, three, and five crests denote formality. This five-crested, black kimono is the highest level of ceremonial wear in Japanese culture. The female relatives of a bride would wear such a kimono to a wedding ceremony. Variations in application of the ground dye evoke mist-like, light qualities. Plants such as mandarin,

chrysanthemum, plum blossoms, and hemp flow along water motifs streaming from a bridge. White lines illustrate the movement of the water and look like designs engraved on metalwork. Bridge motifs gained the most popularity during the Edo period (1600-1868), and outside of landscape scenes, often allude to history and legend. The Gojo Bridge in Kyoto and the plank bridges at Yatsuhashi are the most well-known examples.

Figure 13 – Yukata 10, 1969. Cotton, indigo dyed. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

In Japan, yukata are the most relaxed garments. This attire was first seen in the bath houses of Kyoto and Osaka during the Edo period (1600-1868). It was developed as a way for rich Edo merchants to showcase their tastes as they were banned from wearing silk. The garment reached its peak during the Meiji period (1868-1912). The most common fabrication of yukata is in cotton, which was introduced to Japan in the 15th century. With cotton's high adherence to indigo, indigo's ability to strengthen the material, and cotton's comfortable hand, they were a perfect match. Yukata are worn inside the home and during the summer months because of their breathability. Resist dyeing with large hexagons (the *kikko-mon* pattern) encompass eight varying floral motifs in this garment. Chrysanthemums, clematis, plum blossoms, and hemp are spread throughout.

Figure 14 – Obi 1, 20th century. Silk, hand-painted and paste-resist dyed with embroidered accents. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

The Japanese obi was originally worn hidden and solely for function. During the Edo period (1800-1868), the size and significance of the obi escalated, and eventually became as central to Japanese dress as kimono. Its size variation, tying placement, and tying style has illustrated the evolution of Japanese kimono and styling. The flowing nature of this obi is reiterated in water motifs gently rolling in the background among plants and soaring birds. The leaves of bush clover and bamboo sway delicately alongside the blooms of chrysanthemum, Chinese bellflower, and wild carnation. The bush clover, bellflower, and carnation in particular are part of *Aki no nanakusa*, the Seven Flowers Grasses of Autumn, which is a classic theme of Japanese poetry.

Figure 15 – Obi 2, pre 1950. Silk jacquard, twill. Owned by Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University.

Plum blossoms, peonies, and chrysanthemums swirl amongst corded tassels on this luxurious obi. These flowers are some of the most common motifs in the Japanese decorative arts and kimono. Around the Nara period (710-794), the peony and chrysanthemum were introduced to Japan from China. They were initially valued for their medicinal properties, but as time went on, they were also revered for their beauty and elegance. The flowers are displayed in a complex jacquard and twill design, notable of the Japanese textile tradition.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The program was held and attended by 56 participants (Figure 16). The participants were mainly community members, then professors, and students. They were very engaged during the tour and asked questions about each kimono's symbols, techniques, and purpose. They additionally received a handout with motifs to keep as a visual aid and take further notes (Figure 3). One participant was a retired faculty member of the Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University with expertise in cultural dress. She noted that she was enlightened by the presentation and learned new things about the kimonos she had once studied in years past.

Figure 16 – Presentation of the education program to museum participants.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study maps a multi-step process (Figure 17) for using semiotics and material culture research methods to provide an understanding of Japanese textile artifacts with little provenance for a university exhibit. Despite the objects' little-known history and the inability to connect with past donors, educated inferences were made regarding each kimono, yukata, and obi's motif symbolism, purpose, and overall place in Japanese culture. These were then disseminated through thorough description labels, an educational program, and a handout for the major year-long exhibition.

Prown's[131] process for material culture analysis was especially helpful with the curation being a selection of Japanese garments. With the kimono's emphasis on surface rather than form, each object's interpretation may be likened to analyzing not only an object of adornment but also a fine artwork. Approaching material culture analysis through a semiotic lens was appropriate in interpreting the a) *substance* (fiber content, fabric structure, surface design techniques); (b) *content* (subject matter of motifs present); and (c) *form* (color, texture and how they interact with motifs, and overall motif placement), and overall what the combination of these elements impart about Japanese culture.

The success of this method supports the prior research methods utilized by Areo and Kalilu[132] and Tibbs[133] in that semiotics can be used to trace the origin, meaning, and social cues of a society. It lastly supports Eastop[134] in that an understanding of 'material culture' is beneficial for curating textiles for a museum. The results of this study map the successful use of material culture analysis through a semiotic lens in interpreting textile artifacts with little provenance to be presented in a museum exhibit.

The culmination of this research has significantly increased the body of knowledge regarding the Textile and Clothing Museum, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University's collection of Japanese garments. It is hoped that this research may be the basis of further material culture study of textile artifacts with little known provenance.

131. Prown, *op. cit.*

132. Areo and Kalilu (2013).

133. Tibbs (2012).

134. Eastop (2007).

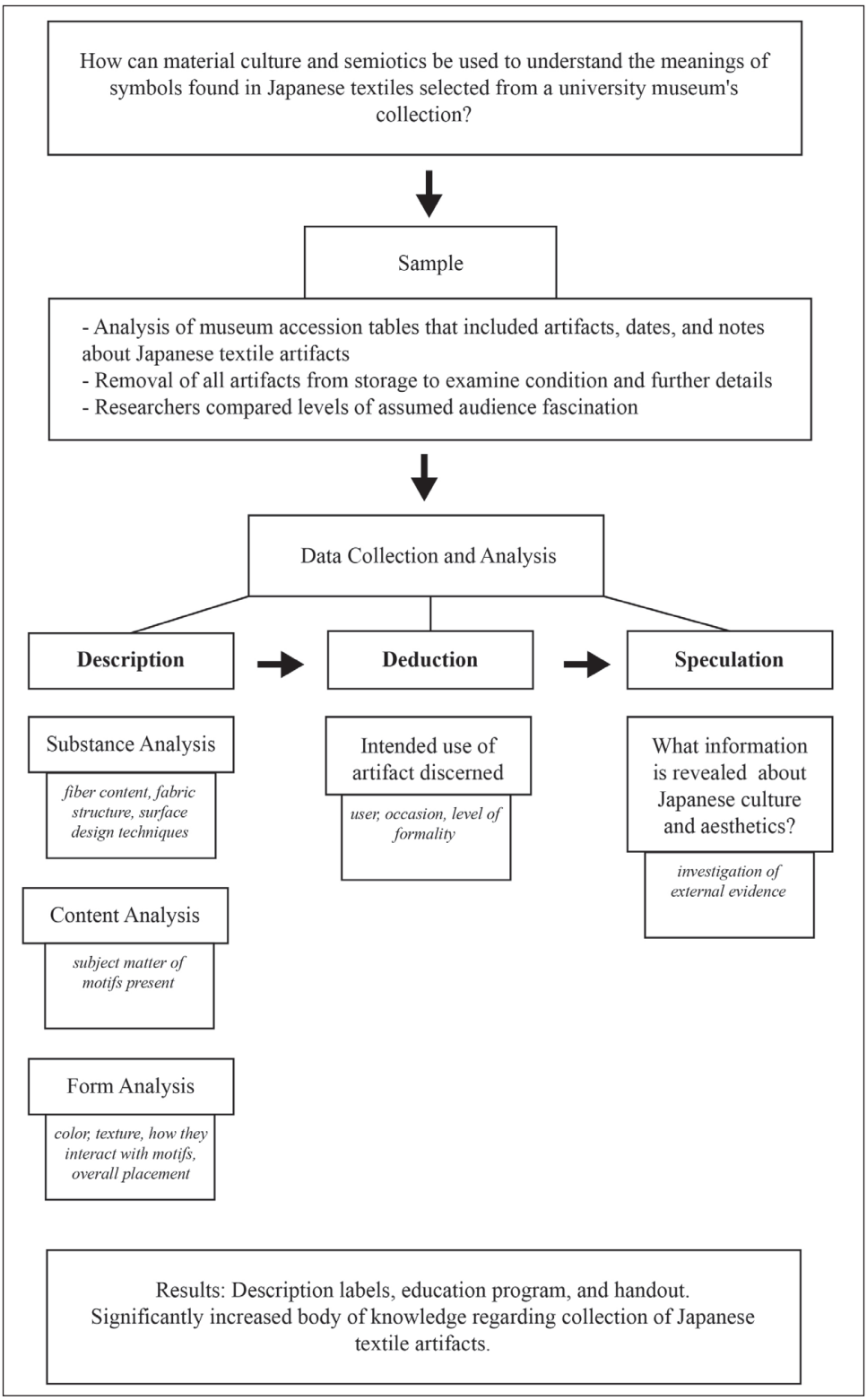

Figure 17 – Multi-step research process for using semiotics and material culture to understand Japanese textile artifacts with little provenance.

REFERENCES

BOOKS, ARTICLES, AND THESES

APPADURAI, Arjun. *The social life of things*: commodities in cultural perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

AREO, Margaret Olugbemisola; KALILU, Razaq Olatunde Rom. Origin of and visual semiotics in Yoruba textile adire. *Arts and Design Studies*, [*s. l.*], v. 12, p. 2.224-6.061, 2013.

ATTFIELD, Judy. *Wild things*: the material culture of everyday life. Oxford: Berg, 2000.

BAIRD, Merrily. *Symbols of Japan*: thematic motifs in art and design. New York: Rizzoli, 2001.

DALBY, Liza. C. *Kimono*: Fashioning Culture. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001.

DEELY, John. *Basics of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

DOWER, John. *The elements of Japanese design*: a Handbook of family crests, heraldry & symbolism. New York: Weatherhill, 1971.

EASTOP, Dinah. Material culture in action: conserving garments deliberately concealed within buildings. *Anais do Museu Paulista*: História e Cultura Material, [*S. l.*], v. 15, n. 1, p. 187-204, 2007. DOI: 10.1590/S0101-47142007000100004. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2O7zQOr>. Access on: Feb. 26, 2021.

GUNTER, Susan. *Japanese design motifs and their symbolism as used on itajime-dyed juban*. Athens: University of Georgia, 1999

INGOLD, Timothy. Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues*, Cambridge, v. 14, n. 1, p. 1-16, 2007. ISSN 1478-2294.

JACKSON, Anna. *Kimono*: the art and evolution of Japanese fashion. London: Thames & Hudson, 2015.

KRUGER, Kathryn Sullivan. *Weaving the word*: the metaphorics of weaving and female textual production. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2001. ISBN 9781575910529.

MILLER, Daniel. *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

PROWN, Jules. Mind in matter: an introduction to material culture theory and method. *Winterthur Portfolio*, Chicago, v. 17, n. 1, p. 1-19, 1982.

TAYLOR, Lou. Doing the laundry? A reassessment of object-based dress history. *Fashion Theory*: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture, Abingdon, v. 2, n. 4, p. 337-358, 1998. ISSN 1362-704X.

TIBBS, Kristen Marie. *"Semiotics of the Cloth"*: Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions. Huntington: Marshall University, 2012.

WONG, Dorothy. *Buddhist pilgrim-monks as agents of cultural and artistic transmission*: the international buddhist art style in East Asia, Ca. 645-770. Kent Ridge: NUS Press, 2018.

YANG, Sunny; NARASIN, Rochelle. *Textile art of Japan*. [*S. l.*]: Shufonotomo, 1989.

SITES

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY. Japan: History-Archaeology. *Asia for Educators*, New York, 2020. Available from: <https://bit.ly/30jzTtd>. Access on: Nov. 15, 2019.

IKI-YA.COM & IKIYA.JP. Spring Attacks. *Japanese Traditional Patterns and Traditional Colors*. Tokyo, [20-?]. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2DqSlIy>. Access on: Oct. 23, 2019.

INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART. *Seven Gods of Good Fortune*. Indianapolis, 2020. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3fhZDMA>. Access on: Nov. 6, 2019.

MATSUYAMA, Hiroko. Japanese Patterns: traditional motifs and designs. *Patterns*, [*s. l.*], 2017. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2On9JAh>. Access on: Oct. 29, 2019.

MELISSA. Motifs. *Ready, Set, Kimono!*, [*s. l.*], 2016. Available from: <https://readysetkimono.com/motifs/>. Access on: Dec. 15, 2019.

PARENT, Mary Neighbour. Seigaiha. *Jaanus*, [*s. l.*], 2001. Available from: <https://bit.ly/38I7ssu>. Access on: Nov. 18, 2019.

RICHMAN-ABDOU, K. The unique history and fascinating evolution of the Japanese kimono. *My Modern Met*, [*s. l.*], Dec. 25, 2017. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2Zg81qi>. Access on: Dec. 13, 2019.

TACHIICHI. What is nani? *Japanese Pattern*, [s. l.], 2020. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3iLHBV8>. Access on: Nov. 17, 2019.

THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD AGENCY. *Exhibition Outlines*: No.35 The Modern Era of Shippo – Japanese Cloisonné (2004/7/3 – 2004/9/5). Tokyo, 2004. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3fgyxFR>. Access on: Oct. 24, 2019.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY. Contemplate Japan. *University Museums*, Ames, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2GX6Kyd>. Access on: Oct. 14, 2020.

Article presented in: 7/18/2020. Approved on: 11/13/2020.