



Japanese Wool Kimono Fabric

The fundamental difference to understand about Japanese kimono fabrics (other than their narrow width) is that they aren't produced in runs of thousands of metres, as in the West. They are designed and printed in single bolts (called a tan) of between 9-12 metres; enough to make one kimono. As a result, there is a level of hand-finishing that doesn't occur in Western fabrics, e.g. ikat, tie-dye, hand-painting and stencil-dyeing.

The finished kimono consists of four main strips of fabric—two panels covering the body and two panels forming the sleeves—with additional smaller strips forming the narrow front panels and collar. Historically, kimonos were often taken apart for washing as separate panels and re sewn by hand. Because the entire bolt remains in the finished garment without cutting, the kimono can be retailored easily to fit a different person.

Kimono fabrics are frequently hand made and hand decorated. Various techniques such as yūzen dye resist are used for applying decoration and patterns to the base cloth. Repeating patterns that cover a large area of a kimono are traditionally done with the yūzen resist technique and a stencil. Over time there have been many variations in colour, fabric and style, as well as the use accessories such as the obi.

Customarily, woven patterns and dyed repeat patterns like the example we have here are considered informal. Formal kimonos have free-style designs dyed over the whole surface or along the hem. During the Heian period, kimonos were worn with up to a dozen or more colourful contrasting layers, with each combination of colours being a named pattern. Traditionally, kimonos are sewn by hand, but even machine-made kimonos require substantial hand-stitching.

Daily use of the kimono began to steadily decline after World War II. The expense and maintenance required, along with a rise in popularity of Western clothing, were all contributing factors. Today, kimono are generally reserved for special occasions, although in the last decade Japan has seen an increasing number of young trendsetters regularly sporting kimono.

The occasion and amount of formality required dictates the type of kimono to be worn. Fine silks are reserved for weddings and other formal parties; cottons are worn for summertime events such as a fireworks display. Subtle messages are conveyed by the type of kimono worn: marital status, age, gender and social standing. The pattern on the kimono correlates to seasons in Japan, thus determining the time of year it is worn. For example, a water or koi pattern would be worn in summer, while a bamboo pattern would be worn in the winter months.

Old kimonos are often recycled in various ways: altered to make haori, hiyoku, or kimonos for children, used to patch similar kimono, used for making handbags and similar kimono accessories, and used to make covers, bags or cases for various implements, especially for sweet-picks used in tea ceremonies. Damaged kimonos can be disassembled and re-sewn to hide the soiled areas, and those with damage below the waistline can be worn under a hakama. Historically, skilled craftsmen laboriously picked the silk thread from old kimono and re-wove it into a new textile in the width of a heko obi for men's kimono, using a recycling weaving method called

