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Oriental Masquerade – The Cultural Impact of Japanese Kimonos in America

It's movie night at the local theatre and there is a new feature film playing. The film being shown is a popular martial arts movie with various fight scenes and a setting that appears to resemble ancient Japan. Throughout the film, the actors appear to be wearing loose cotton robes with wide sleeves and a length that almost reaches the ground. This clothing in particular is known as a kimono, a piece of cultural clothing that originated in Japan. When the audience sees the actors wearing their kimonos, various thoughts start to form. For instance, some might view the kimono as a symbol of Asian culture or a typical form of attire in Japan. On the other hand, there are also those in the audience who wonder why the actors are wearing bathrobes or why they are wandering around in their pajamas. It is these types of viewpoints that characterize the reactions that Americans have towards kimonos, and as a result, East Asian culture. The idea of American actors wearing Japanese kimonos in a martial arts film is an example of orientalism, which is a western representation of Asian cultures in the form of stereotypes. For instance, Americans can associate kimonos with kung fu or any form of martial arts. But others may associate the kimono with a bathrobe or nightgown. These stereotyped ideas demonstrate the impact that kimonos have made on American society. Since they were brought over from Japan, the kimono has influenced American culture by being a part of American fashion, movies, and décor, and is heavily regarded as an oriental product that has generated both interest in Japanese culture and controversy regarding certain stereotypes.

The kimono is a type of robe that is often considered to be the iconic symbol of Japanese culture. According to Terry Satuski Milhaupt, the kimono represents a "tradition-oriented" Japan and is a type of clothing that continues to be a part of the country's culture and history. [1] In the history of Japan, the kimono was designed as a way for determining a person's social status within the nation's social hierarchy of the Edo Period. [2] Around the seventeenth century, Portuguese explorer Jesuit Joao Rodriguez arrived in Japan and became the first westerner to lay eyes on the kimono, describing the garment as a formal or elegant nightgown that reached down to the ankles. [3] But it would not be until 1850 when the kimono began to cross borders and reach America. It started when U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry made an expedition to Japan in an attempt to open up their trade ports to the West. During his expedition, Perry noted some observations about Japanese kimonos in his journal. Similarly to Rodriguez, Perry also described the kimono as a nightgown and he considered the garment to be a form of ancient clothing that was unlikely to change. [4] In Japan, the kimono was viewed as formal clothing, but in the eyes of westerners like Rodriguez and Perry, the kimono was nothing more than a simple robe or nightgown that was not susceptible to changing into anything modern. [5] Given how Japan's borders were isolated prior to Perry's arrival, it makes sense that the Japanese had no other form of clothing to wear other than kimonos, since they were not yet exposed to fashion from the west. However, after Japan's borders were finally open for trade, kimonos became exposed to western nations and an exotic interest in the garment started to develop. Western nations began

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[1] Terry Satuski Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014), 7.
[2] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 31.
[3] Michael Cooper, ed., *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543-1640* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1965), 205.
[4] Roger Pineau, ed., *The Japan Expedition, 1852-1854: The Personal Journal of Commodore Matthew C. Perry* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1968), 186.
[5] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 141.

importing fabric textiles of kimonos from Japan, selling them as exotic products and displaying them at expositions, particularly in America. Through the importation of Japanese textiles and their display at cultural expositions, the kimono began being viewed as a culturally exotic art piece that captured the interest of Americans.

As Japanese fabric textiles became accessible to the West, they were being displayed at international expositions throughout Europe and America. According to Terry Satsuki Milhaupt, Americans first encountered Japanese textiles at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. [6]. Americans such as industrialist Henry O. Havemeyer, became enamored with the Japanese fabric and the artwork that was displayed on them. According to Havemeyer's wife, he purchased the textiles from the exposition and decorated them along the ceiling of their library. [7] This action is a perfect example of how much Americans were interested in this Japanese product at the time. But expositions were not the only way Americans became exposed to Japanese fabrics. When the Meiji Restoration began in Japan, the traditional wearing of kimonos became passé as the Meiji government was more interested in becoming a westernized society. [8] As a result, a market for kimonos began appearing in America. In 1895, Japanese businessman Yamanaka Sadajiro, opened up a shop in Manhattan that specialized in selling Asian products, including kimonos. [9] Like Havemeyer, Sadajiro appreciated the Japanese culture and he wanted to preserve the kimono as an exotic treasure and a family heirloom. [10] Sadijiro's business exposed more Americans to Japanese art, and had gained the support of American Japanese art collectors such as Sturgis Bigelow and Edward Sylvester Moore, both whom were interested in

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[6] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 149.
[7] Louisine W. Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector* (New York: Privately printed for the family of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1961), 15-16.
[8] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 150.
[9] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 151.
[10] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 154

Japanese culture. [11] Eventually, other American businesses also started selling kimonos and profited from them. For example, a department store catalog that appeared in a 1907 issue of the *Los Angeles Times* contained a small advertisement that promoted the sale of half-priced kimonos. [12] This ad not only implies that American retail is interested in the sale and promotion of Japanese souvenirs, but it also suggests that kimonos were now being manufactured in America.

The visual art designs and overall style of kimonos appealed heavily to Western designers. Western designers like Christopher Dresser, were appalled by the artwork displayed on kimonos, and Dresser claims that a beautiful dress infused with colored flowers and "gay and glorious insects" can reflect a feeling of summertime. [13] Dresser was one of several designers who appreciated Japanese art. This appreciation was what lead American retail companies to produce their own kimonos. Candace Wheeler, America's first female interior designer, was intrigued by the naturalistic designs of kimonos and collaborated with other designers to form the design firm, Associated Artists. [14] Inspired by Japanese art, the company produced their own textile designs bearing naturalistic scenes similar to the ones displayed on kimonos. [15] Associated Artists developed and manufactured their own versions of kimonos. But unlike Associated Artists, A. A. Valentine & Co., another American design firm, only marketed kimonos to the public. When it came to manufacturing kimonos, the company had commissioned their art designs (i.e. flowers, butterflies, wisterias) and fabrics through Japanese companies. [16] These

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[11] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 154.
[12] Central Department Store, August 14, 1907, Advertisment, *Los Angeles Times*, 113.
[13] Elizabeth Kramer, "Master of Market? The Anglo-Japanese Designs of Christopher Dresser," *Journal of Design History* XIX/3 (2006), 202.
[14] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 165.
[15] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 165.
[16] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 167.

commissions depended on the customer's preference of style and as a result, A. A. Valentine and Co. had sold customized, embroidered kimonos to the Western market. [17] Whether kimonos were being manufactured or solely marketed by American companies, their appeal became successful in the American market and they soon developed into a fashion sense particularly centered around women. For instance, Ruth St Denis, American pioneer of modern dance, was impressed by the magnificent art style of kimonos and was known to have worn several different one both in her performances and off stage. [18] A picture of her taken in 1920 shows Denis posing in her kimono with an ancient Japanese hairstyle and holding an umbrella. [19] Images such as this became a general image of Japanese women in the eyes of Americans, as the perception of the kimono evolved into something more sexual and oriental through movies and cinema.

Kimonos started to appear in American cinema in the early twentieth century and through this media format, the garment became paired with the image of submissive and alluring women, and was categorized as being oriental. The first time a kimono was set on stage for an actress to wear was in 1905 when Giacomo Puccini developed an opera called, *Madame Butterfly*, which was eventually made into a silent film in the 1910s. The opera tells the story of a love affair between an American naval officer and a Japanese woman. [20] The actress playing the Japanese woman is dressed in a kimono and is characterized as being completely in love with the American. According to a 1938 newspaper article reviewing *Madame Butterfly*, it appears that the woman is submissive and extremely loyal to the American naval officer, even going so far as

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[17] *Women's kimono gown and sash for the Western market with design of maple leaves, early 20th century, silk embroidered and knotted silk fringe on plain weave silk*, in *Kimono: A Modern History*, by Terry Satsuki Milhaupt ,London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014.
[18] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 168.
[19] *The dancer Ruth St Denis in 'oiran' pose*, in *Kimono: A Modern History*, by Terry Satuski Milhaupt, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014.
[20] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 143.

to abandon her ancestor's culture to be with the man she loves. [21] This type of character gave Americans the impression that women in kimonos were flirtatious individuals that would surrender to the desires of white men. One movie in particular that highlights this ideology to the greatest extent is the James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*. Throughout the film, there are several examples of how kimonos were connected to alluring Japanese women. For instance, the character Aki, who assists Bond on his mission, is seen at various points throughout the film wearing a kimono and then a swimsuit. [22] In addition, there is one scene where several Japanese women are washing Bond in an outdoor pool, almost as if they are offering themselves to him. [23] These examples demonstrate not only a connection between beautiful Japanese women and kimonos, but they also separate Japanese women into a separate sphere of culture, thus creating oriental figures. In relation to orientalism, Japanese and other Asian women are often depicted in films as sexual figures wanting to please white men, who appear as the dominant figures over the Orientals. [24] Movies like *You Only Live Twice* and *Madame Butterfly* made Americans who watched those films believe that the white men were the heroes, and that the Asian women were exotic and seductive individuals. This representation, of the "other" culture in these films is a perfect example of orientalism. Movies with this idea in mind continue to be made today. But regardless of this oriental ideology, the kimono remains a popular item amongst Americans today and it's exposure in America is bigger now than it was back in the late nineteenth century.

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[21]"'Madame Butterfly' again to Charm," Jul 12, 1938, *Los Angeles Times*, A11.
[22]*You Only Live Twice*, directed by Lewis Gilbert (1967; Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists), Film.
[23] *You Only Live Twice*, directed by Gilbert.
[24] Shoba Sharad Rajgopal, "'The Daughter of Fu Manchu': The Pedagogy of Deconstructing the Representation of Asian Women in Film and Fiction," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 10, no. 2 (2010), 149.

As America moved into the twenty-first century, kimonos continued to be a part of American culture and their popularity is much greater now than it was in the nineteenth century. For instance, the basic design of kimonos has influenced American designers to modify the garment into a more modern. In a newspaper article from 1982, two Los Angeles designers made some modifications to the kimonos design, by shortening the sleeves, improving the sloping of the shoulders, and increase the length of the garment to the floor. [25] This action demonstrates how Americans adapted their own clothing style from an original Japanese design. But this was also one of the first instances where the kimono was starting to become the modern bathrobe, an item that can be found in almost any American household. The bathrobe and the kimono share similar designs and it is likely that the modern American bathrobe was influenced by the kimono and had transformed the Japanese garment into an everyday American product. In addition, the kimono itself has made it's presence more aware through the internet. [26] Through websites like Amazon, eBay, or independent sites specializing in Japanese imports such as Tangerine Mountain, an American consumer can purchase kimonos anywhere and at any time. In America, it is possible to see anyone, regardless if they are Japanese or not, dressed in a kimono. This representation of Japanese culture can often be categorized as a form of orientalism, where Western nations emphasize Asian cultures in their own image. Orientalism is a broad term however, that covers a multiple topics and can be viewed as something negative or positive. Americans wearing kimonos can be cited as demonstrating an appreciation of Japanese culture or are simply impressed by the artistic design of the garment. On the other hand, some Americans may view kimonos as a form of cultural appropriation and tie it in with themes such as racism or gender stereotyping. In terms of cultural appreciation, Americans who wear kimonos are

[25] "Petals from Hollywood," March 26, 1982, *Los Angeles Times*, 110.
[26] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 29.

embracing the culture of Japan, and this interest can be found at various conventions and gatherings.

On the positive side of orientalism, kimonos can be viewed as an expression of interest in Japanese culture. Scholar Hiroshi Narumi labels the Western appreciation of Japanese culture as the "new Japonism." [27] Americans are considered consumers of Japanese merchandise, buying anything from anime DVDs, manga, Hello Kitty products, sushi, and kimonos. These products are especially popular with the younger generation of Americans. Kimonos in particular have maintained their popularity in America by being included at various events and social functions. One of the biggest examples are anime conventions. As mentioned previously, the younger generation of Americans is infatuated with Japanese culture, with anime being a primary interest. Conventions such as Comic Con or Anime Expo attract thousands of anime fans a year. Some attendees like to cosplay (or dress up) as their favorite anime character, and some of those outfits are kimonos. Because anime is based in Japan, some series depict characters wearing oriental styles of clothing, which leads anime fans to cosplay in garments such as kimonos. Aside from conventions, kimono exhibitions such as Kimono de Jack have begun to develop. Kimono enthusiasts from Kyoto created Kimono de Jack through Twitter. [28] This exhibition, where attendees sport their own kimonos, has been held in Japan, and overseas in other countries such as the United States. An event such as this allows people from other nationalities to participate in the wearing of kimonos and demonstrates how the wearing of kimonos is not limited to Japanese citizens, as seen by this image. [29] Conventions and exhibitions such as these bring together

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[27] Hiroshi Narumi, "Fashion Orientalism and the Limits of Counter Culture," *Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 3 (2000), 315.
[28] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 246.
[29] *'Kimono de Jack' participants in Kyoto*, in *Kimono: A Modern History*, by Terry Satsuki Milhaupt ,London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014.

people who enjoy dressing up in oriental garments. These events demonstrate how the kimono has become a globalized product that not only allows people outside of Japan to become exposed to Japanese culture but it keeps Japanese culture itself alive.

The kimono is an iconic image of Japanese tradition that has become a globalized product and as a result, Japanese culture maintains global popularity and the globalization of kimonos is what keeps Japanese culture alive and well. During the 1990s, Japanese products revolving around anime, manga and video games were being heavily marketed around the world and had achieved global popularity. [30] As a result, the globalization of Japanese pop culture has created a global image that had begun being marketed into a Japanese campaign, promoting "Cool Japan." [31] This idea globalizes Japanese culture and makes it appear contemporary in the eyes of Western nations. An example of this idea can be found on a poster promoting the "Cool Japan" campaign, where Japanese pop stars Puffy AmiYumi are dressed in kimonos and promoting their culture to the American television channel, Cartoon Network. [32] According to Milhaupt, this poster represents the cultural past of Japan by tying in the old tradition of wearing kimonos with pop culture. [33] The poster is a perfect example of globalization, as it exposes the kimono and Japanese culture to a global audience. But in regards to orientalism, the kimono is viewed as the symbol of Japan that the West identifies as a general symbolism of Asian culture. In a globalizing world where kimonos are treated as a tradition of the past and being worn less as an everyday garment (as they were in ancient Japan), it is through the interest of wearing kimonos in America and other parts of the world that keeps the Japanese tradition and culture alive.

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[30] Daliot-Bul, Michal, "Japan Brand Strategy: The Taming of 'Cool Japan' and the Challenges of Cultural Planning in a Postmodern Age," *Social Science Japan Journal* 12, no. 2 (2009): 248.
[31] Daliot-Bul, "Japan Brand Strategy," 250.
[32] *Japan Travel Bureau, 'Cool Japan' campaign poster with pop starts Puffy AmiYumi*, in *Kimono: A Modern History*, by Terry Satsuki Milhaupt ,London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014.
[33] Milhaupt, *Kimono: A Modern History*, 240.

Granted, the Japanese still uphold the kimono as a symbol of their cultural identity, it was through the globalization of kimonos and their connections with pop culture that they have maintained their popularity and existence. Just like during the Meiji Restoration, where kimonos were almost eliminated from Japan, it had took the efforts of American businessmen interested in "oriental goods" to market the kimono and keep it trending. With the idea of orientalism in place, Americans recognize the kimono as a Japanese (or simply Asian) product, and that recognition keeps the tradition alive. However, because the kimono is considered to be an oriental product, it leads some people to assume that the idea of white Americans wearing kimonos is an example of racial stereotyping inappropriate cultural appropriation.

Some Americans choose to wear the kimono as a way of expressing interest in the Japanese culture. However, there are also those who are opposed to the idea of non-Asians wearing kimonos, claiming the action to be linked to racial stereotyping and cultural appropriation. A perfect example of this action was witnessed at the Museum of Fine Art (MFA) in Boston. In 2015, the museum hosted an event known as Kimono Wednesdays that ran every Wednesday night from June to July. [34] The event was a display of European artworks that were influenced by Japanese culture and allowed patrons who were interested (and in some ways, obsessed) in all things Japanese to try on a replica kimono, so as to mimic the Japanese women in the paintings. [35] But during the event, protesters appeared claiming that the idea of Caucasian people dressing up in a kimono was an act of racism. [36] Prior to this event, there have been instances where the kimono was linked to Japanese stereotypes. For instance, in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, actor Mickey Rooney plays the role of a Japanese man, Mr. Yunioshi,

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[34] Julie Valk, "Research Note: The "Kimono Wednesday" Protests: Identity Politics and How the Kimono Became More Than Japanese," *Asian Ethnology* 74, no. 2 (2015): 380.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 381.

who wearing large glasses, fake buck teeth, and a kimono. [37] Images similar to this portrayal have often been cited as the stereotypical image of the Japanese and other Asian ethnicities, and the kimono seems to be an item synonymous with yellow-facing and a one-dimensional view towards Asian-Americans. In addition, the protesters of the Kimono Wednesday event believed that Americans treat the kimono as a costume and that wearing it is offensive toward the identity of Japanese Americans. [38] Based on this argument, it appears that the protesters are stating that the kimono is a piece that truly belongs to Japanese culture and that only the Japanese have the right to wear the garment. The kimono is a symbol of Japanese culture and according to the protesters, those who are not Asian-American and still wear the kimono are mocking the Japanese culture and tampering with the image of historical Japan. But beyond the Kimono Wednesday protests, the kimono has also been linked to gender stereotyping of Japanese women, which affects their cultural identity as well.

Japanese women have been primary targets for gender stereotypes and they are most common when the women are seen wearing a kimono. In the history of Japanese culture, women that were usually found wearing kimonos were known as geishas. A geisha is a traditional female Japanese hostess whose job is to cater to men, by entertaining them or serving them food. To the Americans, the geisha is someone that finds joy in pleasuring men and they have considered these women to be both exotic and erotic. [39] This tradition has led Hollywood stars to portray their own versions geishas in films, by dressing in a kimono, painting their faces white, tying their hair in a bun with chop sticks sticking out, and holding a fan behind their faces. In some American films, the geisha's purpose is usually nothing more than serving drunken men inside a

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[37] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, directed by Blake Edwards (1961; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures), Film.
[38] Valk, "Research Note: The "Kimono Wednesday" Protests," 389.
[39] Juliet O'Neill, "Giddy Over Geishas," Jun 19, 1999, *The Ottawa Citizen*.

teahouse. [40] Together, these stereotypical images imply a sense of prejudice towards Japanese women and showcase a fetish for minority women. In regards to pornography, minority women are popular fetishes that are commonly over sexualized. In the case of Japanese women, they are usually depicted in their kimonos while acting submissive and obedient towards their dominant, male partner. [41] This action can also be observed in the James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice*, where Japanese women give Agent 007 a bath while looking at him in awe and pleasure. [42] There was even an image of a sexually appealing Japanese woman wearing a kimono on the cover of the Ian Flemming novel that this movie was based on. This idea of Japanese women being submissive towards other men is influenced from the tradition of the geisha, but is used in a more inappropriate context that sexualizes the identity of Japanese women in kimonos. Some Americans may link the kimono to a form of sexuality, but in hindsight, the ability for Americans to even wear kimonos is just the natural state of culture exchange, which is still occurring in the present world.

Today, it is not uncommon to see different cultures mixing together, whether it is by food, music, or fashion. America has been fascinated with Japanese culture for over a century now and the culture's popularity continues to grow amongst the younger generation. Wearing kimonos in America is a way for one to express their interest in learning or enjoying Japanese culture. But more importantly, the ability for Americans to include kimonos in their wardrobe, wear them at pop culture conventions, or even include kimonos in their movies is a sign that the image of the traditional Japanese garment remains alive and well. The kimono could have been lost to history during the Meiji Restoration, since the Japanese wanted to westernize their

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[40] O'Neill, "Giddy Over Geishas."
[41] "Minority Womens' Poor Portrayal in Pornography," Apr 12, 2016, *University Wire*.
[42] *You Only Live Twice*, directed by Gilbert.

environment. To keep the garment from going extinct, it took the efforts and support of American businessmen who were infatuated with Japanese products to display kimonos and fabric textiles on the American market. This practice continues today and it is unlikely that the kimono will ever go out of style. While it is true that the kimono is an oriental product that does not automatically imply a negative connotation of the garment. Terms such as “oriental” and “orientalism” are broad terms that can suggest different meanings, whether they are good or bad. How one perceives a kimono depends on their perception and bias. But regardless of opinions, it is undeniable that the impact the kimono has made in America is a direct result of globalization, which is a natural phenomenon that is still occurring today. The Japanese have adopted Western business suits in the same manner that Americans have adopted Japanese kimonos, and this action will continue to strengthen the connections and relations between the East and the West.