



Kyoto maidens practise archery in a still from Fiona Tan's film *Saint Sebastien*

# Kyoto song

Kimonos and obi belts graced spring's catwalks in a blossom-flurry of japonisme

There's an early short film by the artist Fiona Tan that is truly captivating. In *Saint Sebastien*, her camera glides slowly over the seams and folds of the *furisode* – a long-sleeved formal kimono worn by young unmarried women – just as would an inquisitive eye. As the young women aim their bows and arrows in Kyoto's annual coming-of-age archery ceremony, Tan's focus moves from their porcelain cheeks and doll-red lips back to the beauty of the T-shaped garment over and over again.

And so from art to fashion. This season, more than one designer has been looking closely at this traditional Japanese garb, once used to denote wealth, class, gender and age. Traditionally cut from one length of silk brocade, the kimono was sewn entirely by hand from a single bolt of material known as a *tan*. As spring's engineered prints, clever cuts, and barely-there linings go to show, the luxe appeal of this speciality item is as treasured today as it has always been.

Take **Karl Lagerfeld**, who cuts loose-fitting jackets with billowing lantern sleeves at **Fendi**, or **Haider Ackermann's** languid kimono dresses, cinched at the waist with a floppy silk bow. Then there are softly padded jackets and sleeveless tunic dresses in muted tones of white, courtesy of **Alexander Wang** and **Celine**. The kimono has always held a certain allure for Western designers. Back in the Seventies, some, such as **Oscar de la Renta** and **Emanuel Ungaro**, made a bold statement with it – and a highly glamorous one at that. Fitting, then, that it makes a comeback now, as part of this season's glam vibe. Utilitarian yet undeniably chic, with a smattering of Seventies opulence – that's spring's kimono trend. "I appreciate all types of design, but minimal looks (such as the kimono) are very difficult to achieve, which is why it's nice to appreciate the fundamental features with contemporary cuts, >



FENDI

Abraxas Rex's hand-painted silks offer a twenty-first-century update on the kimono

HAIDER ACKERMANN

Belle Europe Westerners adopted the kimono, as seen in this portrait by Emilie Villa



## vogue spy

## vogue spy

innovative prints and fabrics," says **Christopher Kane**, who this season snakes a bold dragon-tattoo print around dresses and skirts. In Japan, a clutch of Tokyo's new-generation designers are reinventing the tradition. Take Hiroyuki Horihata and Makiko Sekiguchi – the pair behind the coveted **Matohu** label. They owe their unique printing and dyeing techniques, together with their ample shapes, to Japan's Keicho period. For their latest collection, they reproprietor loose-fitting jackets with slimmer arms and silhouettes for everyday.

According to Catherine Ince, curator of the Barbican's recent retrospective *Future Beauty: 30 Years of Japanese Fashion*, the kimono's linear, yet elaborate aesthetic is part of Japan's heritage. "I think there is obviously a deep connection to kimono and textile culture in the signature looks of Japanese designers, but this is not readily expressed and many would deny it altogether," she says. "Perhaps it's more of a subconscious thing?"

In the case of **Akira Naka**, another up-and-coming designer making waves beyond Tokyo, that's more likely to be a conscious decision. His eponymous womenswear label launched in 2008 and revolves around soft tailoring and abstract knits in muted candy tones. "I always take my cue from early Japanese textiles and



AKIRA NAKA

DRIES VAN NOTEN

CELINE

A hand-coloured photo of a young lady in a kimono towards the end of the Edo period, circa 1860

craftwork," says Naka. "Here in Japan we are really lucky to have so many craftspeople – that's the strength of Japanese fashion."

"Japanese design has always been considered a mould breaker," says Sonnet Stanfill, a fashion curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Looking back at when it first came to light in the nineteenth century, she adds: "Wearing a kimono back then set you apart as a member of a kind of high-fashion, wealthy but slightly non-traditional club." From Egon Schiele's drawing *Woman in Kimono* to Paul Poiret's stunning kimono coats and ornate costume designs for the Ballets Russes, it's no wonder exotic spirit was the talk of every salon.

For a dash of japonisme twenty-first-century style, look no further than New York-based artist, fashion designer and jewellery maestro Paris Kain. His **Abraxas Rex** label features handpainted silk kimono wraps, in maxi or short lengths. Pair the latter with this season's high-waister jeans and you're good to go. Kain's painterly brushstrokes turn his kimonos into one-of-a-kind masterpieces. One particular print, swimming Koi carp, was inspired by a recent trip to Kyoto. Here, Kain was tutored by an artisan family in the traditions of natural dyes. "It is all about subtle embellishments like these, rather than Zen-style minimalism, and that's what makes this season so seductive," says Melanie Chan, the co-owner of boutique **Cochinechine** – ahead of the curve when it comes to pioneering new Japanese designers.

And finally to Nicola Woods – the designer behind ethical label **Beautiful Soul**. Now in her fourth season, Woods puts a modern spin on things by reworking vintage kimono fabrics into contemporary shapes: wrap-over dresses and versatile capes. At her Notting Hill studio, rolls of brightly coloured silk brocade fill every conceivable shelf space. "Each kimono I cut into tells a tale," says Wood. "I love the idea that someone was once wearing it – it has such history." *Lucie Muir*

"JAPANESE DESIGN HAS ALWAYS BEEN CONSIDERED A MOULD-BREAKER"

ISSEY MIYAKE

ALEXANDER WANG

MATOHU

A kimono-inspired evening cape designed by Paul Poiret in 1914

