Curator's Statement

"Dressed by Nature: Textiles of Japan" centers on the importance of local resources for human survival and comfort. With the collapse of global supply chains during the Covid-19 pandemic, it's an especially meaningful message now.

This exhibition also debuts the Thomas Murray Collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia). A well-known independent researcher and art expert with a fantastic eye for textiles from around the globe, Murray built his Japanese collection over nearly 40 years. In 2019, the museum acquired the entire collection of more than 200 outstanding textiles, which catapulted Mia to among the foremost collections of Japanese textiles in the world. After nine years spent in pursuit of this collection, I am very excited to share more than 120 textiles here with you now.

Textiles are an intrinsic part of life across all cultures throughout history. No other medium at once communicates social standing, cultural values, and aesthetics while also carrying out a functional purpose. Because these textiles were made to be worn and used, we refer to their creators as makers; nevertheless, their creations show

pure artistry. This exhibition presents textiles made between around 1750 and 1930 that derive from three geographical areas belonging to present-day Japan: the northern islands, including Hokkaido, home to the indigenous Ainu people living in a climate comparable to ours in the Midwest; the Japanese mainland; and the subtropical Okinawan Islands, on the same latitude of the Bahamas. Showcasing regional craft traditions (mingei), these textiles are not the standard silk kimonos usually featured in displays as the typical clothing from Japan (though, in fact, reserved only for the upper classes). Instead, you will see a wide range of textiles for farmers, fishermen, and others made from local materials, including fish skin, paper, elm bark, nettle, banana leaf, hemp, wisteria, deerskin, cotton, and wool. Indeed, "Dressed by Nature" not only celebrates the resourcefulness of humans in general, but also the ingenuity of these makers, all unknown by name to us, who created beautiful, functional works of art.

Dr. Andreas Marks
Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese and Korean Art
Director of the Clark Center for Japanese Art

Indigenous Textiles of Asia's Far North

People native to Asia's far north include the Ainu and the Nivkh. They made intricately patterned and technically complex garments from materials close at hand or received in trade. These garments reflect intimate relationships with the natural and spiritual worlds, as well as with their neighbors, China to the west and Japan to the south.

The Nivkh people inhabited the lower Amur River region of Siberia and the northern part of Sakhalin Island, now parts of Russia. Their lives centered on hunting and fishing. Nivkh women used the skins of chum salmon and Amur carp to make extraordinary clothing for special occasions. The skin was removed in one piece and then dried, kneaded, and moistened until supple. The result is a lightweight, durable material that is also water- and wind-repellent. These women's festival coats (*hukht*) evoke Chinese and Manchu robes. They are richly decorated with appliqué and embroidery of abstracted, zoomorphic designs that represent masks, birds, serpents, and dragons of Chinese origin.

Ainu Robes

Old items carry the weight of the times with them. I could easily envision an Ainu woman spending many evening hours lovingly sewing clothes for her family by the light of a fireplace or a kerosene lamp.

—Eiko Ota, Ainu, 2013

The Ainu are native to Japan's northernmost islands and parts of the Russian Far East. The garments in this gallery and the next were created by Ainu women for family members as formal attire worn at events, such as weddings and religious ceremonies.

Spirit beings, called *kamuy*, coexist with Ainu people and can both help and harm. Made in part from fibers harvested from elm bark or nettles, these robes feature elaborate embroidered patterns meant to please the eye and protect the wearer. Designs are placed where a person might be most vulnerable—the back, the robes' openings—to repel disease, violence, or harmful spirits. For the Ainu women who create the robes, the act of stitching is a physical way to invest prayers and love into the garment, for both the healing and protection of the wearer.

The Indigenous Ainu People and Japan

The Ainu people are native to Hokkaido (the northernmost of Japan's main islands), the Kuril Islands, and the southern part of Sakhalin Island, which today belongs to Russia. Japan first expanded its influence into Hokkaido in the 1400s by establishing trading posts, and its presence steadily grew over the centuries that followed. Until the middle of the 1800s, most Ainu people continued to maintain their own culture and language, but a growing number were persuaded or forced to work for the new Japanese-run fishing industry.

In 1871, during Japan's modernization under Emperor Meiji, the Japanese government banned some Ainu customs in an effort to assimilate them. Subsequently, their lands were appropriated through several governmental land acts. The Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act of 1899 sought to fully integrate the Ainu into Japanese society by declaring them to be "former aborigines," removing Ainu from their traditional ways of life, recasting them as farmers, and demanding they learn the Japanese language.

It was not until 1997 that the act was replaced by the Ainu Cultural Promotion Law, which provides government financial support for the promotion and maintenance of Ainu culture. In 2019, a bill recognized the Ainu as indigenous people of northern Japan and banned discrimination against them. In 2017, about 13,000 people identified as Ainu, but less than a dozen are fluent speakers of their native language. Relearning weaving and embroidery techniques is one way Ainu people are now reclaiming their culture.

Trawell states

Today we associate most travel with pleasure; however, in preindustrial Japan travel was not for the fainthearted. Long-distance travelers needed permission by the government, which sought to control the movement of people in great numbers to prevent uprisings by the feudal lords. Normal travelers navigated the unpaved roads on foot, while the more affluent could rent horses or be carried by porters or servants in sedans or palanquins. Food and shelter were expensive, making travel special and rare. These hardships called for simple, utilitarian clothes that were either durable enough to withstand the rigors of travel or cheap enough to be discarded when they inevitably succumbed to them.

Community and Belonging

In pre-industrial Japan, a person's public identity was largely defined by the class to which one was born, determining what one did and where one lived. This rigid stratification also governed which materials one could wear: by sumptuary edicts, silk was reserved only for nobility. Commoners wore textiles of cotton, ramie, and other natural fibers, which they made special in numerous ways, as each of these galleries lavishly shows.

Most commoners inherited their profession from their parents and lived and died in the community to which they were born, or in neighborhoods devoted to their trade. But in that certainty lay strength and belonging: a fisherman was part of a community of fishermen. An indigo dyer lived and labored among other indigo dyers, enjoying a collective sense of self and purpose.

Public festivals were important moments to express this collective identity. Various professional groups sponsored events, and their members would appear together, often in complementary clothing emblematic of their shared background.

Firefighters

During the Edo and Meiji periods (1603–1912), fires were a constant threat to the many thousands of people living in the densely populated cities of Tokyo (then Edo) and Osaka. Because buildings were made of wood, the use of indoor stoves and paper lanterns could cause local accidents capable of quickly spreading. To prevent conflagrations, organized firefighting brigades were authorized to fight fires and enforce rules designed to keep them from starting. These men were indispensable, considered heroes for their valor, strength, and loyalty.

| DATE | NAME | CASUALTIES |
|------|--|---------------|
| 1641 | Oke-machi Fire | 400+ |
| 1657 | Great Meireki-Era Fire / Furisode Fire | Up to 107,000 |
| 1683 | Great Tenna-Era Fire / Fire of Yaoya Oshichi | 830-3,500 |
| 1698 | Chokugaku Fire | 3,000 |
| 1704 | Mito-sama Fire | _ |
| 1745 | Rokudō Fire | 1,323 |
| 1760 | Hōreki-Era Fire | _ |
| 1772 | Great Meiwa-Era Fire | 14,700 |
| 1806 | Great Bunka-Era Fire | 1,200 |
| 1829 | Great Bunsei-Era Fire | 2,800 |
| 1834 | Kōgo Fire | 4,000 |
| 1845 | Aoyama Fire | 800-900 |
| 1855 | Great Ansei-Era Earthquake and Fire | 4,500-26,000 |



Wakabayashi Kihei, Long-lasting Map of Edo, 1860, Woodblock print. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

Festivals in Japan

Festival garments are the finest clothes of common people, no less beautiful than their silk counterparts, which were reserved for nobility. Worn in public at festivals, they display the immense skills of the talented weavers and dyers who coaxed beauty and complexity from humble, affordable materials.

Japan is home to many festive occasions, either celebrated nationwide or localized. Local festivals, called *matsuri*, are often held in late summer or early autumn to coincide with the rice harvest. Traditionally sponsored by a shrine or temple, they originated with the aim of soliciting favor from the gods to ensure the survival of the communities. At matsuri, merchants sell street food and alcohol, as well as amulets and other ritual items intended to bring health, protection, and prosperity to their owners. Community groups assemble under painted banners, dressed alike and marching together, sometimes carrying huge floats that convey their shared purpose and livelihoods.

The Alchemy of Indigo

Indigo, a deep and vivid blue dye made from plant materials, was easily the most preferred color for cotton textiles in rural Japan. The months-long process of rendering dye from indigo leaves harnesses the biological and chemical forces of fermentation and oxidation, resulting in a substance with many qualities beyond just color. In China and Japan, leaves and seeds were believed to help against fever, snakebites, and stomach disorders; Japanese farmers considered indigo-dyed work clothes to have a protective effect. The dye reinforces the fabric and also has antibacterial properties, making it popular for undergarments that lie against bare, sweaty skin—even if it turns the wearer a distinct blue hue.

In the hands of a skilled dyer, indigo astonishes the eye. Because the dye sits on the surface of cotton fibers, repeatedly dyeing the same cloth can yield richer, denser, nearly black blues as the pigment builds up. By the same token, indigo-dyed cotton fades over time, with repeated washing and surface rubbing. Well-worn garments tell the stories of their use in the changing blue tones of their surfaces.

Making Garments

In pre-industrial Japan, various natural materials passed through many specialists' hands on their journey from raw form to finished textile. Textile workers generally inherited their professions, skills, and tools, resulting in a profound depth of technical and artistic knowledge as well as a continuity across generations. Textiles were fashioned from a broad range of materials, including cotton, but also rice straw, bast fibers (thread-like fibers in the woody stems and inner bark of plants and trees), and paper. Dyers evolved techniques that are exceptionally complex and varied, from the intricate binding and knotting of shibori (tie-dyeing) to the mathematically precise kasuri (ikat), in which threads are dyed individually so that a pattern emerges once they are woven together. Finally, techniques were developed to recycle well-used cloth into new textiles, from the cotton patchwork of boro to the shredded and rewoven textiles of saki-ori.

Cotton in Japan

The earliest evidence of the use of cotton originated from Mehrgarh in the Indus Valley, in today's Pakistan. Traders first transported cotton to Japan in 799 from the Kunlun Mountains in Western China north of Tibet. For centuries, cotton remained a luxury item because it had to be imported from China and Korea. The discovery in around 1600 of a cotton species that grew well in Japan's climate and soil rapidly expanded its cultivation. Because of its softness, warmth, and durability, cotton was vastly superior to the bast fibers previously available to the common people. During the Edo period (1603–1868), farmers were able to turn cotton into a cash crop. By the 1930s, Japan had become the largest exporter of cotton cloth, but that dwindled significantly after World War II (1939–45).

Okinawan Textiles

A large part of the more than 160 islands that today comprise Okinawa Prefecture was once the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429–1879). Its location—midway between Kyushu and Taiwan, at the southernmost point of Japan's archipelago—was economically advantageous. Annexed by Japan in 1879, the kingdom's islands played a key role in the maritime trade between China, Vietnam, and Indonesia, which influenced its aesthetic vocabulary.

The hot, humid weather of these subtropical islands motivated Okinawans to develop uniquely light and airy textiles woven from ramie (*choma*), a nettle plant, and *bashō*, the leaf of the Japanese fiber banana. The finest textiles were reserved for the Ryūkyūan aristocracy, as were certain colors and patterns. These Okinawan textiles were also in high demand in the Tokugawa shogunate in Edo (present-day Tokyo) as an alternative to silk—equally luxurious but much more comfortable during the stifling summer months.

Clothing and Identity in Okinawa

During the era of the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429–1879), sumptuary laws, which enforced social hierarchies by governing who could wear what fabrics, tightly regulated access to textiles, dyes, prints, and printing techniques. For example, kasuri (ikat) textiles, in which individual threads are dyed to form designs when woven together, was reserved for the nobility. Because they could not wear actual kasuri cloth, commoners replicated kasuri designs using stencils. Likewise, a complex system of laws inspired by those at the Chinese court governed bingata, the process of stencil dyeing with resist paste. What's more, color and design signified rank. Only the royal family could wear dragon and phoenix motifs, and the color yellow was restricted to royalty and high nobility. Even the size of motif was regulated, with larger motifs reserved for high-ranked courtiers, while lower-ranked nobles wore smaller motifs.

The Japanese annexation of the kingdom in 1879 marked the end of these restrictions, and luxury textiles could be worn by all who could afford them. Nonetheless, Japan imposed its own restrictions on Okinawans, pressuring them to dress in conventionally Japanese garments.