

Nō Motifs in the Decoration of a Mid-Edo Period Kosode

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IN PREMODERN JAPAN, as in the West, clothing reflected social class, personal taste, and (at least in later centuries) prevailing fashion. But traditional Japanese clothing was also an art form, one that shared many of the aesthetic canons of painting, lacquerware, ceramics, and poetry. Among the foremost of these canons is allusiveness—what is expressed, or explicitly depicted, must also imply, connote, and evoke ranges of further meaning or feeling. A cherry blossom is never merely a cherry blossom. It is also the quintessential symbol of mortal beauty, particularly feminine beauty; of the ephemerality of all mortal things; and of the guardsman-turned-monk Saigyō (1118–90), arguably Japan's best-known and -loved poet, who celebrated in his verses the evanescent glory of wild cherry groves in flower in the Yoshino Mountains.¹ As an art form, traditional Japanese clothing was laden with cultural significance analogous to that found in Western tapestries but rarely, if ever, in Western apparel. It is in this aspect that traditional Japanese clothing differs most profoundly and significantly from Western, and it is this aspect of which most Western viewers are unaware.

As always in history, accidents of survival limit the evidence and therefore our conclusions: by “traditional Japanese clothing” we can mean only outer garments of the well-to-do of both sexes, from the mid-sixteenth to the late nineteenth century (the Early Modern period, 1568–1867). Of the clothing of the poor we cannot speak, for it was worn to rags, and little clothing of any kind has survived from before the sixteenth century.

For Japanese attitudes toward clothing, however, we have abundant evidence in literature dating at

least as early as the eleventh century. Where Western authors would describe features or character, their Japanese counterparts unfailingly imply these by describing dress: beautiful garments identify a great beauty, harmonious and impeccably appropriate apparel signifies an attractive and sensitive man. In a society that prized connoisseurship, not everyone was expected to be an adept at paintings or calligraphy or swords, but everyone wore clothing, and it was a mark of the cultivated person to show a fine discrimination toward it. Clothing, being an accepted index of both physical attractiveness and personal quality, was in all centuries a subject of nearly obsessive interest and rigorous connoisseurship.²

That being the case, we must ask what made a “good” design, one that lent its wearer the required aura of refinement, beauty, and elegance. The Japanese kosode, precursor of the kimono and outer garment of both sexes from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, was to a greater or lesser degree always “custom made.” Since kosode show almost no variation in cut and little draping, their art and distinctiveness lie entirely in the designs that were woven, dyed, embroidered, or pasted onto the fabrics. What was required in these designs was excellent delineation and composition, harmonious color, skillful execution, and thematic appropriateness.

All of these criteria except the last are familiar in the West. Moreover, Westerners also acknowledge certain correspondences between clothing designs (and colors) and the occasion, the season, and the wearer's age and sex: floral patterns are more appropriate for women than for men, more for summer than for winter, more for leisure than for work; and children are often dressed in navy blue but never in

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black, except for black velvet worn on festive occasions.

Yet in Japan “thematic” appropriateness means infinitely more than that. Many, if not most, Japanese clothing designs are not generically decorative but specifically emblematic. They are pictures, and almost without exception the pictures function also as symbols. Clothing designs refer to seasons of the year or to particular holidays, festivals, and ceremonies; to famous episodes or periods in Japanese history; to places noted for their scenic beauty; to elevated moral qualities or simple wish fulfillment; and to literature. To Westerners, this last category is the most unexpected of all. We do not ornament our clothing with deliberate though more or less veiled references to the works of Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Keats, still less to scenes from *Le Morte d'Arthur* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or *The Aeneid* or *The Odyssey*. But Japanese clothing designs of the Early Modern period teem with just such allusions to similarly esteemed works in the Japanese and Chinese literary canon.³ The effect was to “invest” the garments with the connotations of their literary referents and thereby lend them a cultural weight entirely absent from Western apparel.

The body of literature to which these literary referents belong was all “classical,” that is, both elevated and old, and, by twentieth-century Western standards, it was not large. It included the various compilations of poems by the so-called Immortal Poets of various periods; poems from the imperial anthologies, primarily the tenth-century *Kokinshū* and thirteenth-century *Shin Kokinshū*; poems from Fujiwara Teika's hugely popular thirteenth-century anthology *Hyakunin Isshu*; poems of and tales about the twelfth-century monk-poet Saigyō; the tenth-century *Tales of Ise* (a collection of poems enclosed in brief narrative vignettes); the works of certain Chinese poets, notably Tao Yuanming (365–427) and Bo Juyi (772–846); *The Tale of the Heike*; *The Tale of Genji*; and various Nō plays, most of them probably of fourteenth- or fifteenth-century origin, in which the diction is deliberately “high” and “poetical.” As can be seen, this body of literature was heavily weighted toward poetry. Although meant for adults, it also tended, by long Japanese tradition, to be “published” (or at any rate produced) with illustrations.

It was an indication of refinement and cultivation to ornament one's clothing with motifs drawn from

this body of literature that alluded aptly to one's situation or frame of mind or to the occasion on which the garment was to be worn. And it was equally a measure of sophistication to be able to identify such allusions with casual expertise. The word *kosode* means, literally, “small sleeves,” and the Japanese of the Early Modern period may, to a considerable extent, be said to have worn their level of culture, sensibility, and literary sophistication on their sleeves.

Not that the literary designs on *kosode* were mainly narrative in content; quite the contrary. Most often they consist of elements of the natural setting or the man-made appurtenances of the scene. Among the most ubiquitous are chrysanthemums bordering or floating in a stream, which summon up the legend of the page boy Kikujidō, whose vindicated innocence and miraculous gift of eternal youth became the subject of the Nō play of the same name; large wooden cartwheels evoke *The Tale of Genji* in general and one scene of the novel in particular (the cartwheel motif is known, in fact, as *Genji-guruma*, “Genji wheels”); irises by a stream, with or without an angled bridge, refer to *Tales of Ise*.⁴ These are only some of the commonest and most easily recognized examples.

Most literary *kosode* seem to offer only a single theme, but one, in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 1), boasts at least three, possibly more. All of these are taken from dramatic literature, and probably (though not certainly) all are from Nō plays.

The fabric of this *kosode* is an aubergine silk crepe (*chirimen*), with somewhat stylized decoration in a most appealing palette of persimmon reds, aquamarines, white (in reserve), and metallic gold. Its designs were accomplished in a variety of techniques: brush dyeing (*yūzen*), stenciled imitation tie-dyeing (*kata-kanoko* or *suri-hitta*), silk-thread embroidery in satin stitch, and a liberal use of couched gold. All these techniques, and their use together, are consistent with the late-eighteenth-century date originally

1. *Kosode* decorated with Nō motifs (back view). Aubergine silk crepe with *yūzen* and *kata-kanoko* dyeing, satin-stitch silk embroidery, and couched gold embroidery. Late 18th or early 19th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Hamilton King, 1956, 56.59



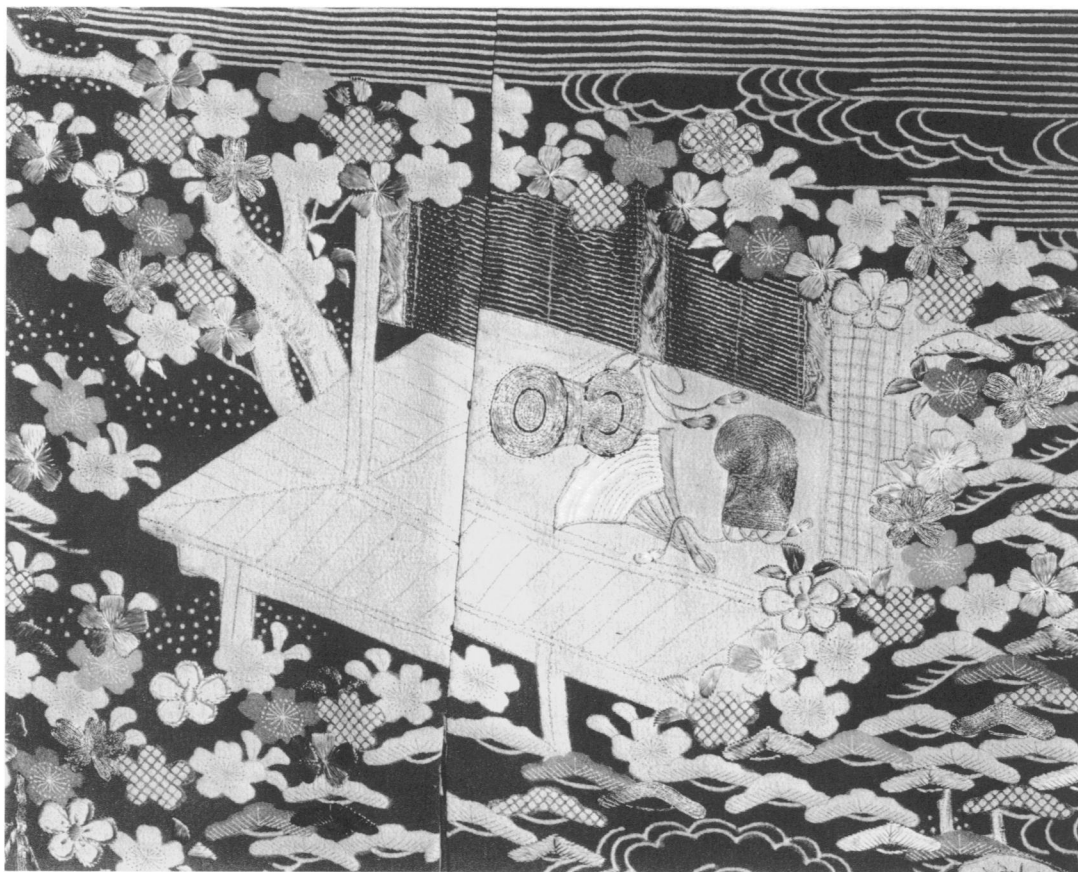
assigned by the Museum, but an early-nineteenth-century date is now considered more plausible.⁵ Although the profuse floral decoration makes the robe seem feminine to the Western eye, we cannot say for certain whether it would have been worn by a woman or by a man.

The back of the right sleeve establishes indubitably the reference to drama (Figure 2). A stage is embroidered against a background of pines, cherry blossoms, cloud, and mist. On the stage are the hand drum (*ko-tsuzumi*) that provided background music for Nō performances, the fan (*shūte*) invariably carried by the leading actor, and a tall court hat (*eboshi*). On the left sleeve, on a field of mist, cloud, and blossoming plum, is a warrior's horned helmet (Figure 3). Both hat and helmet came into use during the Heian period (794–1185) and were worn, with little

apparent variation, for centuries thereafter. A thick scattering of white dots across the shoulders and sleeves most likely represents falling snow and visually links the motifs on the right and left sleeves.

Unquestionably this motif cluster takes its subject from the principal heroic conflict in Japanese history, which occurred during the second half of the twelfth century. This conflict had two phases: the first a seesawing mortal struggle for power between the Taira (or Heike) and Minamoto (or Genji) warrior clans, which ended in the extermination of the Taira; the second, immediately ensuing, an equally deadly power struggle among the victorious Minamoto leaders. The winner of this latter contest was Minamoto no Yoritomo, who became the first shogun of Japan, but its tragic hero is his young half brother Minamoto no Yoshitsune. It may be mere literary tradition that endowed Yoshitsune with equal measures of military brilliance, knightly valor, and courtly accom-

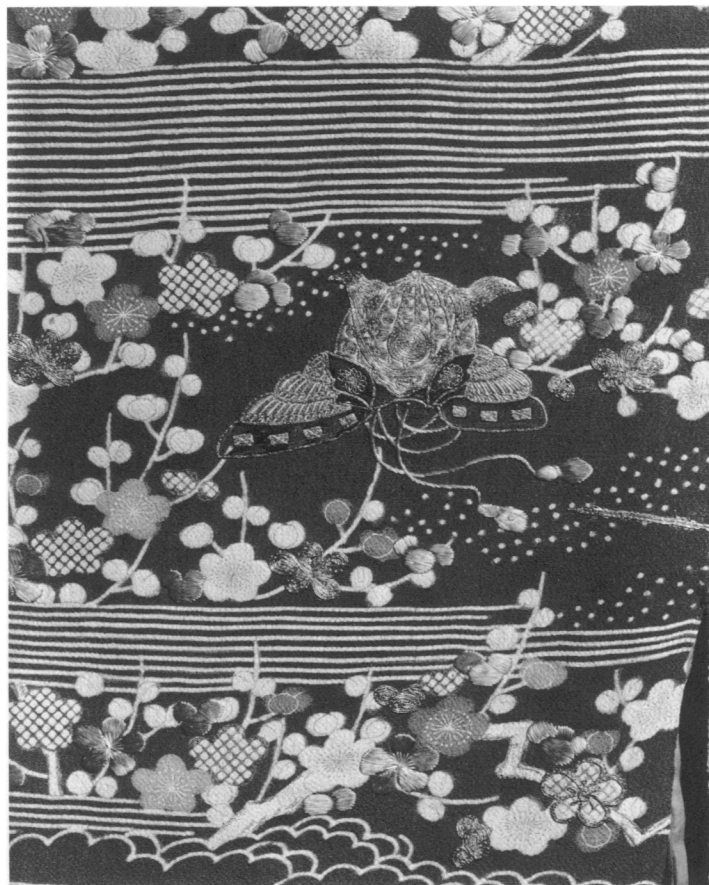
2. Detail of Figure 1. Right shoulder: Nō stage with props—hand drum, fan, and court hat, amid pine and blossoming cherry



plishments, but it is historical fact that the jealous and suspicious Yoritomo hounded him to his death. For later authors, the stirring events of this period became a quarry to be mined repeatedly for subject matter. The same historical personages and episodes, variously presented and embellished, turn up in several surviving Nō dramas (as well as prose tales and Kabuki plays).

We cannot be certain which particular Nō play (or plays) is represented on the upper section of this robe. To this author the most likely candidate seems to be *Eboshi Ori*. In its action this play echoes the David and Goliath story: the very young Yoshitsune single-handedly cuts down a gigantic bandit leader and scatters his followers in a bloody retreat. During the time of the action Yoshitsune is hardly more than a child (still called, in fact, by his boyhood name, Ushiwakamaru), his clan has been nearly destroyed by the rival Taira house, and he himself has just escaped house arrest and is being relentlessly hunted by Taira forces. He needs a disguise, and for this he goes to the Hatmaker, whom he requests to make him a "left-folded *eboshi*." The prescient Hatmaker protests that in these days of Taira triumph one must not wear a left-folded *eboshi*, the kind worn by the men of the Minamoto clan before their defeat. But Yoshitsune persuades him, and as the Hatmaker works, the Chorus chants his ruminations about the "things [that] were, but shall not be again / . . . / When the houses of Gen and Hei [Minamoto and Taira] were in their pride / Like the plum tree and cherry tree among flowers / . . . / Then, as snow that would outsparkle the moonlight / Gen strove with Hei. . . ."⁶ It is all there on the robe: the snow, the blossoming plum and cherry, the helmet of the clan warrior in battle. Only Yoshitsune's sword, which the noble-souled Hatmaker refuses in payment for the *eboshi* and with which Yoshitsune later destroys the bandits, is missing from among the motifs on the robe. In Nō performances, however, the fan of the leading actor doubled as many another prop, including, very often, a sword. And a fan there is, prominently placed on the stage on the right sleeve of the *kosode*.

It is also possible, however, that the two sleeves refer to two different Nō plays, which were derived from other episodes in the same historic conflict. The stage and its appurtenances on the right sleeve may allude to the beautiful dancer Shizuka Gozen, Yo-



3. Detail of Figure 1. Left shoulder: Warrior's helmet

shitsune's loved and loving concubine, who figures prominently in two pertinent Nō plays. In *Funa Benkei*, Shizuka is given an *eboshi* as a keepsake at her parting from the hunted Yoshitsune. In *Yoshino Shizuka*, in which Shizuka delays her lover's pursuers, her keepsake is a hand drum (*ko-tsuzumi*) that was originally a gift from the emperor to Yoshitsune.⁷ The helmet and plum blossoms on the left sleeve may well symbolize Yoshitsune's warrior-follower Kajiwara Genta no Kagesue, protagonist of the Nō play *Ebira*, whose bravado impelled him to adorn his panoply with plum blossoms to make himself an easier mark in battle.⁸

It is *Eboshi Ori* that seems most simply and completely to account for the design across the shoulders and sleeves of the *kosode*. But whatever the particular reference intended by its wearer and designer, it



seems certain that this design was meant to evoke some episode—perhaps several episodes—in the Yoshitsune legend.

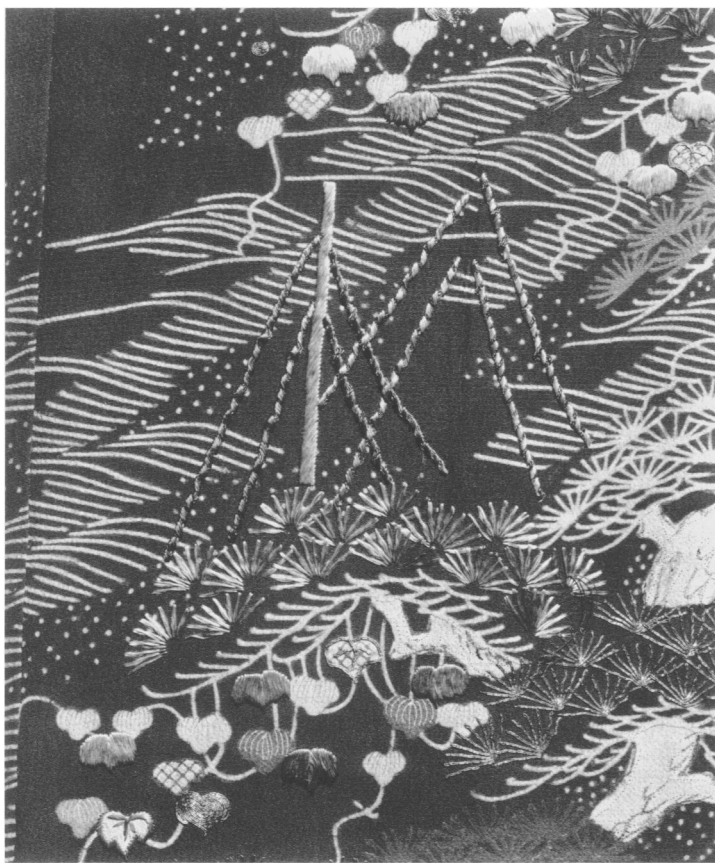
Hagoromo was a well-known legend throughout most of East Asia even before it became one of the most popular of Japanese Nō plays. It tells of the Fisherman who lands along a pine-clad beach and finds there, hanging on a pine bough, a glorious feathered cloak (*hagoromo*). Never has the Fisherman seen a thing of such radiant beauty, and he is about to take it home when he is intercepted by the Immortal Lady, to whom it belongs. She pleads for her cloak, as she cannot return to the realm of the Immortals without it. At first the Fisherman refuses, then, moved by her distress, he gives it back to her. The Immortal Lady puts on the cloak and in gratitude dances for the Fisherman, while the Chorus sings.⁹

At the most prominent point on our kosode, the very center of the back, we find embroidered the feathered cloak (Figure 4). Notes in the Museum's files identify the cloak as a "phoenix," but this "phoenix" has neither head nor wings, nor any other part pertaining to a bird; it is unmistakably a cloak or cape and has, moreover, unmistakable sash ends with

4. Detail of Figure 1. Center skirt: Feathered cloak hung on pine bough

5. Detail of Figure 1. Center skirt: Fisherman's rod and creel





6. Detail of Figure 1. Right skirt: Fishing nets drying on poles

which to tie it around the shoulders. The cloak is shown flung over a pine tree, and around it are other pine trees, the Fisherman's rod and creel (Figure 5), and poles with fishing nets draped over them to dry (Figure 6).

The third motif is a band of chrysanthemums bordering a river or stream (*kiku-sui*) (Figure 7). This appears just below the Yoshitsune motif cluster and again above the hem of the robe. Chrysanthemums and water are the identifying emblems of Kikujidō, hero of the legend and Nō play of the same name. Kikujidō, in ancient times, was a young page, banished from the court of a Chinese king to the wilderness, for inadvertent or falsely charged *lèse-majesté*. In this rude exile he was expected to die, but Kikujidō drank from a stream into which dew had fallen from the chrysanthemums lining its banks, and this chrysanthemum dew proved to be an elixir of eternal youth. The theme is youth immortal and innocence triumphant; small wonder that it was perennially

popular, on the stage and as a motif in paintings and all the decorative arts.¹⁰

The fourth motif cluster is the most problematic: a half-open gate, of a type that appears in many paintings of the medieval period, set amid blossoming cherry trees and pines (Figure 8). Evidently this motif was thought worthy of emphasis, for it appears twice: once at the center back, somewhat below the Yoshitsune cluster and above the fishing nets of *hago-romo* (Figure 6), and once on the left front at about breast level. In Japanese poetry and art the half-open gate may suggest a lover visiting his lady, but neither the author nor several historians of Japanese art and literature have been able to connect this motif with an extant Nō play. Conceivably it alludes to a play whose text has been lost; we know of many such. Or it may in fact have been used merely as decorative "filler."¹¹ But any reader who can offer a literary source for this scene is invited to do so.

By the eighteenth century, to which this *kosode* might be dated, Nō had become a strictly aristocratic entertainment. Unlike the Kabuki, whose performances were open to anyone with the price of a

7. Detail of Figure 1. Skirt hem: Chrysanthemums along stream





8. Detail of Figure 1. Center shoulder: Half-open gate

NOTES

1. Each of these connotations has myriad literary references, of which we shall cite only a single example: "Her hair fell in a wide, graceful cascade. She was of just the right height, so beautiful in every one of her features that they added up to more than perfection. A cherry in full bloom . . ." (Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, Edward G. Seidensticker, trans. and intro. [New York, 1983] p. 602); "It is just because / they scatter without a trace / that cherry blossoms / delight us so, for in this world / lingering means ugliness" (*Kokin Wakashū*, Helen C. McCullough, trans. and annot. [Stanford, Calif., 1985] no. 71); "Why should my heart / still harbor / this passion for cherry flowers / I who thought / I had put all that behind me?" (poem by Saigyō in *From the Country of Eight Islands*, Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, eds. and trans. [New York, 1981] p. 171).

2. For a measure of the kind of significance and degree of attention accorded to clothing, the reader is referred to Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 425 (11th century); Murasaki Shikibu: *Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs*, Richard Bowring, trans. and ed. (Princeton, 1982) pp. 151–153 (11th century); *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, Ivan Morris, trans. and ed. (Baltimore, 1971) p.

ticket, Nō plays could be seen only by commanding a performance or being invited to a command performance. Acting troupes were maintained and performances commissioned by the great daimyo (highest-level samurai) houses, including the Tokugawa shoguns and collateral branches of their clan, who derived considerable cultural kudos from their patronage. Typically, a single performance included at least two plays and as many as five, always interspersed with comic interludes (*kyōgen*).

Doubtless this well-designed and finely executed kosode was made for a passionate aficionado of the Nō theater, conceivably to attend or to commemorate a specific performance. Although we have no proof, it seems a reasonable hypothesis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author offers profound thanks to Jean Mailey, head of the Textile Study Room at the Metropolitan Museum, for generously permitting repeated access to the Japanese textiles in her charge. It is she who originally suggested that the identification of the motifs on this kosode be published.

40 (11th century); *The Poetic Memoirs of Lady Daibu*, Phillip T. Harries, trans. and intro. (Stanford, Calif., 1980) p. 40 (13th century); *The Tale of the Heike*, Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida, trans. and eds. (Tokyo, 1975) p. 559 (13th century); *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*, Karen Brazell, trans. and ed. (Stanford, Calif., 1973) p. 55 (14th century); *Masukagami*, in Donald Keene, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (New York, 1955) p. 252 (14th century); Ihara Saikaku, *Five Women Who Loved Love*, in Keene, ed., *Anthology*, p. 337 (17th century). The single citation from each work is intended only as an example; meticulously detailed descriptions of dress are ubiquitous in these works and throughout premodern Japanese fiction and diaries.

3. Chinese literature was esteemed in Japan much as Classical, i.e., Greek and Latin, literature was in the Renaissance West and later.

4. I know no English translation of *Kikujidō*; the tale itself may be found in Henri Joly, *Legend in Japanese Art* (Rutland, Vt., 1967). The cartwheel episode in *Tale of Genji* occurs in chap. 9, and the irises denote chap. (more accurately, episode) 9 in *Tales of Ise*.

5. Barbara Ford, Associate Curator of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum, has stated in a private conversation that she believes the robe to be of the 19th century.

6. Arthur Waley, *The Nō Plays of Japan* (Rutland, Vt. / Tokyo, 1976) p. 72.

7. Shizuka and the drum also figure prominently in the Kabuki play *Yoshitsune Sembonzakura*. Although Nō and Kabuki theater shared a great many subjects (including the various legends surrounding the figure of Yoshitsune), they differed radically in their aesthetic principles and in the public to which they appealed. Two other motifs on the kosode allude unmistakably to Nō, and it seems extremely unlikely, though not categorically impossible, that one garment would have incorporated references to Kabuki as well as Nō. For this possible alternative identification of the motif, the author is indebted to Barbara Ford.

8. For the suggestion that the helmet and plum blossoms on the left sleeve constitute a separate motif alluding to *Ebira*, I am

indebted to Masako Watanabe. If in fact they are an individual motif, they unquestionably allude to the audacious Kagesue. There are, however, many versions of Kagesue's story; in some he adorns his helmet, in others his cuirass, in yet others his quiver. The word *ebira* means "quiver" and the kosode does not depict a quiver, but a helmet and crossed arrows.

9. Waley, *The Nō Plays*, pp. 176–184.

10. Chrysanthemums and water became one of the stock motifs of Japanese art, commonplace in all ages and mediums; doubtless they were often used as a kind of filler or background design, with the reference to Kikujidō only glancingly or subliminally intended. Here, however, the motif is twice repeated and rendered in embroidery and couched gold, lending it an emphasis that suggests a purposeful allusion to the Nō play.

11. This possibility has been espoused by Dr. Iwao Nagasaki of the Tokyo National Museum, who very kindly studied photographs of the robe for me.