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The Evolution of *Yuzen*-dyeing Techniques and Designs after the Meiji Restoration

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Yuzen-dyeing¹ became the fashion at the end of the 17th century in Japan. *Yuzen*-dyeing, a paste resist-dyeing technique, was used to create freehand designs with multiple colors, resulting in large pictorial images, unburdened by the repetitive patterns that characterize most textile techniques. This technique, now called *hon-yuzen*, which literally means “true *yuzen*” or “original *yuzen*” revolutionized *kosode*² decoration in the 18th century. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the design and technique of *yuzen* dramatically changed, and created a new fashion not only among the wealthy but also among middle class women. Behind this evolution stand significant influences of Western textile technology, as well as changes of the social system of Japan. In this paper, I will explore how the introduction of synthetic dyes to Japan influenced *hon-yuzen* techniques and designs, and how pictorial designs for *yuzen* created by Japanese artists made a strong impact on kimono decoration in late 19th-century Japan.

The *yuzen*-dyeing technique was established at the end of the 17th century and flowered in 18th century Japanese textile culture. Originally, the term *yuzen* was derived from the name of a popular fan designer in Kyoto, named Miyazaki Yuzen. Since his designs were very popular, kimono makers and kimono design book publishers designated patterns in his style as the ‘*yuzen*-pattern’ in *kosode*. A fashion book, titled *Yuzen-hiinagata* published in 1688 presented designs in his style such as fan-shaped patterns that were arranged to decorate *kosode*.

By the end of the 17th century, the paste resist-dyeing technique that we now call *yuzen*-dyeing was established. *Yuzen*-patterns were associated with the technique, and this fashion for pictorial *kosode* lasted for about ten years. During this period the paste resist-dyeing technique started being called *yuzen*-dyeing. Around 1692, *yuzen*-style patterns went out of fashion; nonetheless the technique itself survived and is called *yuzen*-dyeing to the present day.

Traditional *yuzen*-dyeing was a true handcraft that made it possible to create pictorial images and as a result, it was very expensive. It is characterized by very fine outlines called *itome*, so that *hon-yuzen* is also called *itome-yuzen* in the present day.³ In order to outline pattern areas, rice starch paste (*nori*) was squeezed from a cone by hand onto the fabric. The paste contained glutinous rice powder, rice paste, rice bran and lime; however the ratio of the ingredients was a secret of the craftsmen. After a liquid made from beans

¹ This paper focuses on “*yuzen*-dyeing” from the end of the 17th century to the early 20th century. In Japan’s contemporary textile industry, the term “*yuzen*-dyeing” often refers to any printing and dyeing method in Kyoto.

² *Kosode* is a style of kimono whose sleeves have small wrist openings, and *tomesode* and *furisode* are included in this style. However, after the Meiji period, the general term became “kimono.”

³ The following description of the *hon-yuzen* technique is based on the technique of *yuzen*-dyers in the 20th century.

called *gojiru* was brushed on to make the dye penetrate, pattern areas were brush-dyed with various colors to create complex designs. The brush shading technique (*bokashi-zome*) was often used to achieve subtle gradations in shades of colors. After the patterned area of fabric was further resisted with additional rice starch paste, the background was dyed by brush in a technique called *hiki-zome*.⁴ After steaming to set the dyestuff in the fabric, the fabric was washed in water to get rid of the starch paste. In the final step, the fabric was smoothed with steam in order to adjust the length and width. For additional decoration, embroidery could be applied before the cloth was sewn into a *kosode*.

In the early 19th century, *yuzen* designs became standardized and there was little variety. The typical design in the early 19th century was called *akebono-zome*, with a ground color of either dark gray or brown, and the lower part was dyed in a light color patterned with stylized motifs such as flowers, leaves and symbolic designs derived from classic literature, Nō plays, and famous landscapes. This fashion did not change until when the invention of a new *yuzen*-dyeing technique created a new fashion in the 1880s.

Japan made a great effort to catch up to Western technology after its national isolation of 260 years. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 brought radical change to the society and people, and also to the textile industry. The Japanese government was strongly interested in modernizing textile technology. The Japanese Chemistry Bureau (*Seimikyoku*) was founded in Kyoto in 1870, and chemists from Germany and Holland were invited as supervisors. Japanese weavers and dyers were sent to Europe to learn advanced textile technology.⁵ Technical books that introduced Western dyeing methods including both natural and synthetic dyes were published one after another.⁶

The declining economy after the Meiji Restoration made it difficult for kimono dealers in Kyoto to produce and sell high quality *yuzen*. In order to make *yuzen* kimonos more widely available, labor-saving and cost-cutting methods were necessary, as well as the adoption of Western technology to develop a system of mass production. The introduction of synthetic dyes brought about a renaissance in *yuzen*-dyeing, making more complex designs possible while decreasing the amount of time needed to create them.⁷ New developments in *yuzen* occurred in both technique and design: the invention of a new stencil dyeing technique called *kata-yuzen*, and the collaboration with Japanese artists to design cartoons.

⁴ Before the *hikizome* technique was established, the fabric was dipped into a dye vat, or the fabric was tie-dyed and partially dipped into a dye vat in order to dye the background.

⁵ Nakamura Kiichirō, who studied dyeing technology in Germany, taught Western dyeing methods at the Japanese Chemistry Bureau in 1875. Weavers and dyers were sent to Lyon, France in 1872; Inabata Shōtarō went to France to study dyeing technology in 1877; and two interns, Takamatsu Chōshirō and Mita Tokubei, from the Japanese Chemistry Bureau were sent to Germany in 1880 and returned to contribute to the development of dyeing technique in Japan in 1884 (Matsuki, 264-265).

⁶ “*Kagaku-jikken Somekō-shinsho*” was published by Miyasato Seisei in 1876, and “*Seiyō-Senshokuhō*” was published by Tokyofu Kangyouka in 1878. (Matsuki, 265).

⁷ Although Izutsuya Tadasuke started to use aniline dyes in Kyoto in 1862, and synthetic dyes made in Germany firstly imported to Kyoto in 1870, that aniline dyes were officially imported to Japan. (Matsuki, 264).

In the *kata-yuzen* technique, the newly introduced synthetic dyes could be mixed with the starch paste that had formerly been used only for resisting dyes on the fabric. That is, the starch paste containing dyes functioned simultaneously to dye colors and to resist other dyes. When the dyed fabric was steamed, the dye penetrated the fabric and the paste stayed on the fabric. Thus, the paste with dye could be applied to the fabric through stencils, which traditionally had been used for paste-resist dyeing of cloth. This Western influenced technique (*utsushi-yuzen*) was first used in 1879, on a woolen fabric called *mosurin*, and resulted in a cost-effective, mass-produced product called *mosurin-yuzen*.

Although most *yuzen*-dyers in Kyoto were proud of their craftsmanship and unwilling to adopt new techniques, one pioneer was Hirose Jisuke who attempted to adapt the new technique for wool to silk crepe, the typical material for *yuzen*. Hirose set out to adjust the ratio of starch paste and dye, to prevent the running of colors, and to improve the steaming of dyed fabrics. As a result, he invented a method of mixing starch paste with synthetic dye in 1879 and a method of dyeing the background with the same paste in 1881. It was the birth of a new stencil dyeing technique for silk that is called *kata-yuzen*, today.⁸

In *kata-yuzen*, the fabric was placed on a long wooden board.⁹ Basically, one stencil was needed for each color so that complex patterns with multiple colors needed a number of stencils.¹⁰ Starch paste mixed with synthetic dye was applied by spatula through stencils instead of using a brush. A brush was directly applied on to the fabric through a stencil only for making a color gradation. The background was also dyed with the dye paste instead of using a brush, and then the fabric was steamed. This background dyeing technique (*shigoki*) featured a very bright synthetic color compared with the colors of the brush dyeing technique (*hiki-zome*.)

The new technique sped up the process of *yuzen*-dyeing and allowed for precise kimono designs that led to a new fashion among middle class women who could not purchase high quality, *hon-yuzen* kimonos. Although the dress code was fixed by class in Japanese feudal society during Edo period, after 1868 women could wear any kimono regardless of the hierarchy. The background dyed in vivid synthetic colors, contrasted with complex pictorial design.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, many Japanese painters lost the patronages of feudal lords. In addition, their works were considered old fashioned and not modern enough for Meiji leaders. At that time, looking for new designs for kimono, a *yuzen* dealer, Nishimura Sōzaemon, had the idea to request a Japanese artist, Chikudo Kishi, to draw *yuzen* cartoons. It was around 1875 when painters such as Imao Keinen and Kōno

⁸ *Yuzen*-dyeing on velvet called *Birōdo-yuzen* was also established by Nishimura Sōzaemon in 1878. (Matsuki, 265).

⁹ The following description of *kata-yuzen* technique is based on the dyeing process of contemporary *kata-yuzen* technique.

¹⁰ Although fine white outlines such as those in *itome-yuzen* can be identified in *kata-yuzen*, they were done by applying paste through stencils instead of freehand with a cone.

Bairei contributed pictorial drawings for *yuzen*-patterns.¹¹ Since then, many Japanese painters of the Shijō-Maruyama school have been associated with *yuzen*-dyeing processes such as drawing cartoons or underdrawings on fabrics. In the late 19th century the artists revitalized late Edo-period designs and achieved more realistic patterns on kimonos by way of the new technique of stencil-dyeing with synthetic dyes. Moreover, in the early 20th century, the new *yuzen* technique became successfully associated with the new Western style, Art Nouveau, which was introduced into Japan after the International Exposition of 1900 in Paris.

At the end of the 17th century, the *yuzen*-dyeing technique would not have developed without fashionable *kosode* designs by Yuzen. In the late 19th century, the establishment of a new *yuzen*-dyeing technique was supported by the introduction of Western textile technology. Then in the early 20th century, the new *yuzen*-dyeing technique presented new designs inspired by Art Nouveau. It is clear that development of the *yuzen*-dyeing technique was always achieved through a series of innovations: the stylish fan designs by Yuzen in the 17th century, the vivid color of synthetic dyes in the late 19th century, and Art Nouveau designs in the early 20th century.

The development in the late 19th century was related to the drastic change of the Japanese social system and culture after the Meiji Restoration. The establishment of *kata-yuzen* was a result of a synthesis of Japanese craftsmanship and Western technology. The new dyeing technique and vivid synthetic color in late 19th century kimonos are reflections of the Japanese admiration for Western technology. At the same time, pictorial designs by Japanese artists represent a longing for the traditional culture and lifestyle of the Edo period that Japanese people in the early Meiji period felt in spite of themselves. Containing both old and new cultural aspects, *yuzen*-dyed kimonos in the late 19th century are a unique reflection of a changing Japanese society and of people who faced the Western world.

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¹¹ Imao’s drawings were published in *Keinen Kachō Gafu* in 1892, and Kōno’s *Rei Hyakuchō Ggafu* was published in 1881. An association of artists who drew *yuzen* patterns was founded in 1892. (“Senshokunobi” 73-75).