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### Introduction to the Panel

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Panel Title: **From Kitsch to Art Moderne: Popular Textiles for Women in the First Half of Twentieth-Century Japan**

by Arai, Mutoh, and Wada

**Introduction to the Panel**

by

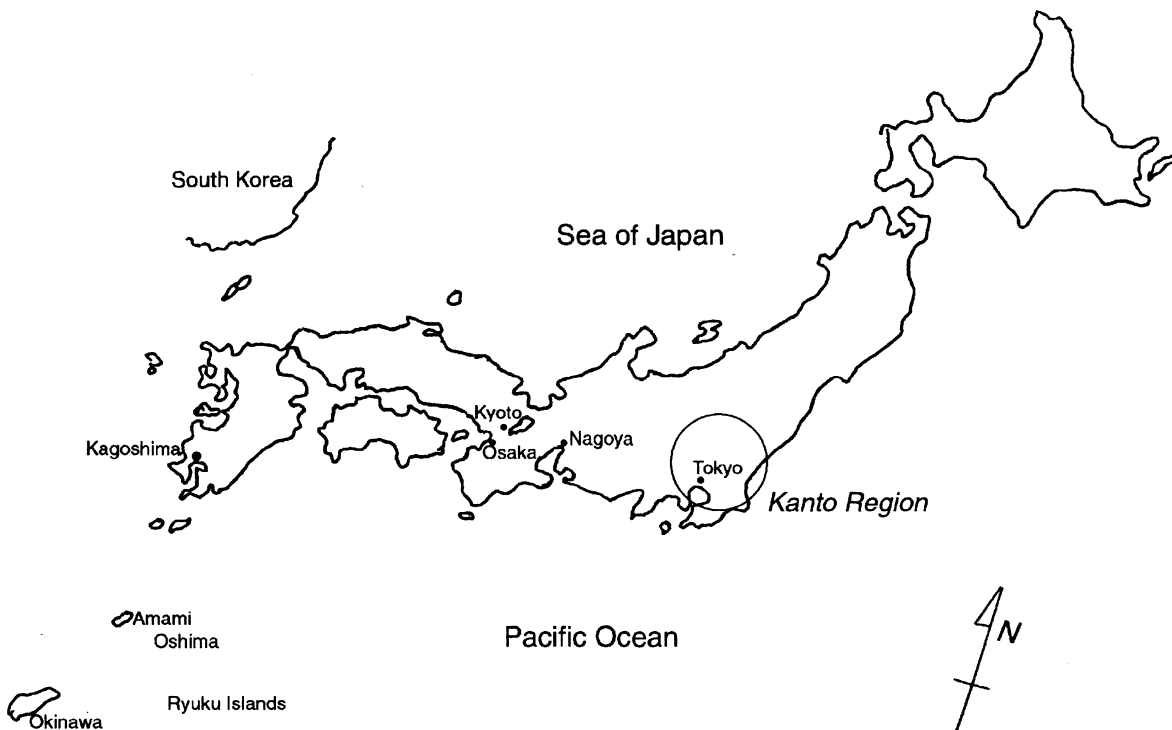
Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada

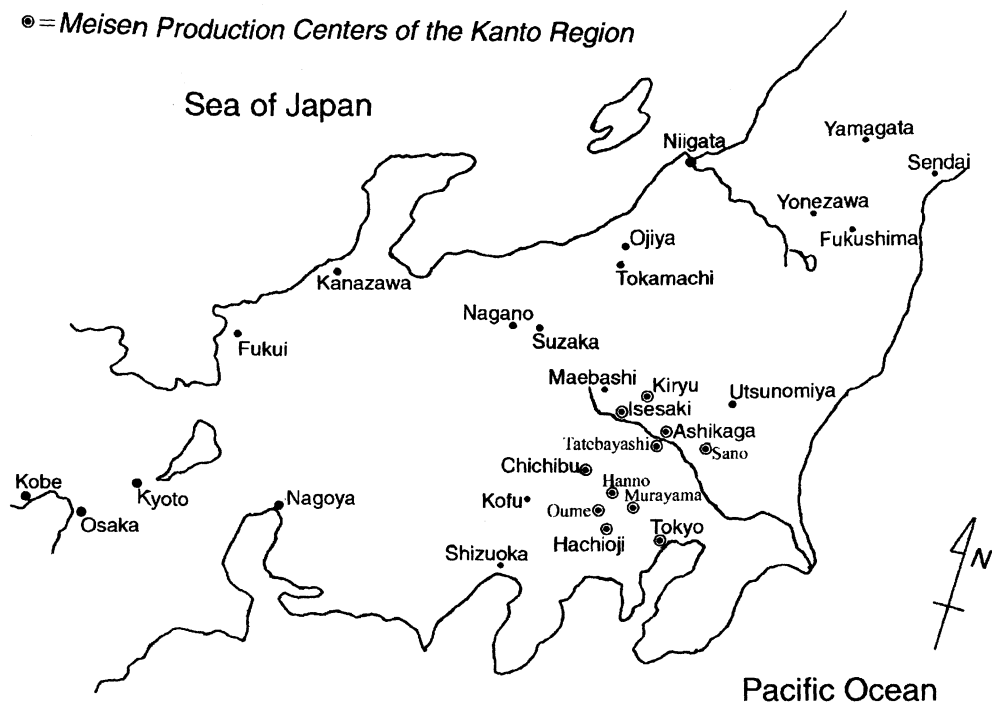
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The socio-historical factors of this era, including the effect of foreign culture, influenced consumer choice and production decisions regarding *meisen* textiles. Industrialization brought by the West generated demand for a new urban labor force, thereby providing for women work and educational opportunities that had not previously existed. The cloth produced during this time in history spoke of a kind of freedom and a conspicuous popular taste that celebrated women's changing position. Looking at the way women expressed themselves through textiles provides a wonderful approach to understanding this period of recent Japanese history.

*Meisen* was a commercial term for a popular, widely distributed textile used by middle-class women and children for everyday wear (kimono and *haori*), by working class women for special or festive occasions, and by many people for coverlets and sitting cushions (*futon* and *zabuton*). The term *meisen* appeared in a wide range of written materials from the late Edo period (18th century) until the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

While *meisen* widely permeated society throughout Japan, production of the cloth was mostly concentrated in the Kanto Region, Japan's largest area of flat cultivatable land created which was by the Tone River. On the slopes and fields between the mountains and the Kanto Plain, mulberry trees were planted and farmers were involved in the sericulture industry.





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Historically, clothing for Japanese common folk was very plain. Ordinary wear was made of bast fiber (*asa*) or cotton, and some silks for special wear were woven with sturdier spun yarn (*tsumugi*) rather than glossy reeled silk (*kinu* or *honkenshi*). Because of the sumptuary laws enforced by the feudal government during the Meiji period (1868-1912), well-to-do commoners demonstrated their sophisticated taste in their choice of linings rather than in outer material. Ikat-patterned *meisen* (*kasuri*) besides stripes became popular initially because the understated beauty of its design appealed to the commoners who were used to wearing subdued patterns.<sup>2</sup>

Although the simpler conservative textiles of the commoners' clothing continued to be made, the reign of Taisho Emperor (1912-26) marked a new wave of Westernization and industrialization in Japanese society and culture including textile design. People felt free to be daring about what they wore away from traditional systems. More factories were built and workers came from villages to work in textile industries; reeling silk from cocoons, spinning yarns, and weaving cloths; or to work in cities as maids, waitresses, teachers, or nurses. They formed a new group of consumers that had not existed before. Other patrons of *meisen* were middle- to lower-class women of all ages who chose *meisen* for their clothing and household items, and high school and college women students called "*jogakusei*." Masanao Arai's paper "*Jogakko-meisen: Kimono Trends in Women's Schools in Early Twentieth Century Japan*" focuses on the aesthetic manifestation of the vibrant roles women played in the new society, as well as the inherent painterly quality of images derived from *hogushi* and *heiyo* processes. The interesting examples of *jogakko meisen* (women's school *meisen*) illustrate how the textile makers provided these active new consumers in the growing middle class with visually exciting products. These fashions were affected by the educational opportunities for women presented by the new government along with the interest taken by Western missionaries in modernizing the lives of Japanese women.

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If the quantity of production was large, so was the competition. The *meisen* textile makers created not only new styles and designs, but they also invented methods that produced different effects to satisfy consumer demand. Kazuo Mutoh's paper "*Hogushi and Heiyo: New Methods of Creating Painterly Images in Woven Textiles*" gives insight into the textile technology of the early 20th century when many mills and factories were established. Innovations by textile artisans and producers experimenting with new processes, tools, and equipment provided the means to mass produce textiles that catered to the changing demands of women consumers thereby creating a new expression in textile design.

The ending of the feudal system meant facing international competition and ensuring the survival of Japanese sovereignty. The textile industry provided the main fuel in Japan's race to catch up with the West. Textile was the star industry in the first half of the century in Japan just as automobile was during the post World-War-II era. The textile makers were not only innovative in technical development but also in marketing approaches. Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada's paper "*Starlets and Masters: Meisen Posters of Beauties Published by the Textile Makers*" points out how Westernization and industrialization pulled Japan swiftly out of a medieval social structure into a modern capitalist one, out of which new marketing techniques emerged. Ironically, those changes that helped give birth to the exciting *meisen* kimono textile, also paved the way to the almost total conversion of Japanese clothing to Western style garments in less than a half a century.<sup>3</sup>

By 1907 (M 40), the country had recovered from a dark period caused by the internal turmoil of the Meiji restoration and subsequent civil war, as well as two international wars against Ching-dynasty China and Russia. The economy improved and a positive Western influence permeated urban society, where people felt more freedom to express themselves, especially in their taste for new styles of clothing. The sudden popularity of "*muslin yuzen*" (wool challis decorated with traditional *yuzen* prints) reflected the societal changes taking place. This so-called muslin (pronounced mo-su-lin) print was first imported from France and England in about 1875 (M 8). People were attracted to the fine colorful woolen fabric, a novelty in Japan. In around 1880 (M 13) the Japanese textile makers realized that using traditional stencil papers (*katagami*) for direct printing, with paste mixed with dye (*ironori nassen zome*) they were able to produce wool challis prints domestically. These multicolor printed wool fabrics were used for kimonos, for kimono linings, and for under-kimono (*juban*). Ordinary Japanese were not accustomed to wearing bright colors or showy designs for outer wear except children and young women, but they were more daring with prints and colors for their linings, or under-kimono.

The phenomenon of wool challis prints exemplifies the Japanese textile industry at the turn of the century, when the makers responded to the market and to novel Western materials with new methods of production based on traditional technology. It also gives a point of reference to the subsequent popularity of *meisen* in the beginning of the twentieth century.