

POWERFUL PATTERNS

Meisen Kimonos from the MAK Collection—A Friis Donation

MAK – Press and PR

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Press Release

Vienna, 11.3.2025

Press Conference

Tuesday, 11.3.2025, 10 am

On the occasion of the generous donation of an approximately 60-piece collection by the Danish collector Henriette Friis, the MAK is dedicating an exhibition to Meisen kimonos and haoris from the first half of the 20th century. In the central room of the MAK Design Lab, colorful pieces patterned in the bold “all over” style with modernist-inspired designs from the Taishō (1912–1926) and Shōwa periods (1926–1989) will be showcased illustrating the characteristic features of this special form of kimono. At the same time, the patterns of the Meisen kimonos tell of Japan’s engagement with European modernity and its significance for the type of “new women,” before Western-influenced clothing completely replaced kimonos in everyday life.

The striking Meisen kimonos played a central role for “modern women” in the first half of the 20th century in Japan. They were predominantly worn by Japanese women who were employed and thus represented the type of woman who strove for independence. While at the beginning of the first bloom of Meisen kimonos in the 1920s Western workaday clothing was already the norm for the majority of working men in Japan, it remained an exception for women, who were still much more bound to traditional roles. The Meisen kimonos with modern patterns, which were inspired by cultural interactions between Japan and Europe, offered women an ideal way to present themselves as both modern and traditional. Over the course of the 1920s, Meisen kimonos became popular workaday and evening wear for women, partly because they were significantly more affordable than formal silk kimonos and could also be cleaned at home due to their durable material.

For the innovative patterns of the Meisen kimonos, the designers drew from both the Japanese design repertoire and European modernism. Influences from modernist art and decorative arts are clearly noticeable, including movements such as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Expressionism. A striking example of this is a kimono from the Friis

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collection featuring a rose in the style of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Conversely, the Japonisme that had been rampant in Europe since the second half of the 19th century had previously already begun to significantly influence Western art and design—among others, the Wiener Werkstätte. Meisen kimonos thus serve as further evidence of the multifaceted cultural transfer processes and the artistic interplay between Europe and Japan.

While in the ending 19th century silk kimonos with intricate patterns at the hem and workaday cotton kimonos with graphic patterns were widespread, the Meisen kimono revolutionized design in the first half of the 20th century with modernist influences and bold, large-scale patterns. The curved lines of some Meisen designs, which were previously reserved exclusively for high-priced silk fabrics, were particularly popular. Thanks to innovations in stencil printing, the blurred motifs of the Meisen pieces imitated artistic, originally hand-dyed Kasuri or Ikat fabrics. In doing so, they sometimes drew on the traditional Japanese canon of forms while simultaneously being propelled into the new century through unusual combinations of individual elements and extreme enlargement.

The classic canon of forms of the Meisen kimonos includes diagonal as well as geometric patterns, among them diamond and lattice structures. During the second bloom of Meisen kimonos in the 1950s, elements that bring expressionist brushstrokes and modernist decorations to mind appeared. Stylized floral motifs, reminiscent of the fabrics of Hawaiian shirts, could also be found during this period.

The kimonos owe their name to the material “Meisen” [pronounced “me-i sen”], which can be literally translated as “raw silk.” It is a mechanically processed type of schappe silk. For a long time, silk was reserved for the privileged upper class of Japan. Only in the late 19th century technological innovations in the production of schappe silk led to greater availability of the material. Additionally, they could be bought off the peg in Japanese department stores, allowing also less “affluent” consumers to switch from cotton and simple bast fiber fabrics to silk.

What is exceptional about the Meisen kimonos is not only the mechanically processed raw silk designed with Ikat color gradients, but also the often vibrant color design of their patterns, which became possible due to the use of synthetic aniline dyes. These innovations clearly distinguished them from the traditional silk kimonos that were still in use until the 19th century and contributed to the popularity of kimonos, which increasingly became a symbol of the change in Japanese society and the interplay between tradition and modernity in the first half of the 20th century.

Press photos are available for download at MAK.at/en/press.



Press Conference

Tuesday, 11.3.2025, 10 am

Opening

Tuesday, 11.3.2025, 7 pm

Free admission to the opening of the exhibition

Exhibition Venue

Central Room MAK Design Lab

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

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Exhibition Dates

12.3.–24.8.2025

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10am–6 pm

Curator

Lara Steinhäußer, Curator, MAK Textiles and Carpets Collection

MAK Admission

€ 16.50/15.50*

reduced € 13.50/12.50*

every Tuesday 6–9 pm: admission € 8/7.50*

Free admission for children and teens under 19

* Online ticket price

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