1998

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A group of more than a dozen original paintings of "kimono beauties" or *bijinga,* literally "picture of a beauty," is in the collection of the Ashikaga Museum of Modern Art, Ashikaga, Tochigi Prefecture. They were painted by well-respected master painters between 1920s and 1930s, commissioned by the Ashikaga *Meisen* Weavers Association to be reproduced in postcards and posters to promote their products, Ashikaga *meisen.*[4]

Another group of large posters of movie actress "beauties" wearing *meisen* kimonos is in the collection of Shimojo Koichiro, a former *meisen* dealer/producer, now a drapery manufacturer in Isesaki, Gunma Prefecture. These posters were published by the Isesaki Weavers Association to promote Isesaki *meisen* during the period spanning 1926 to 1957 but interrupted by World War II.

Japanese culture had a counterpart to the Western poster before the Meiji period. During the Edo period, traditional block printing flourished, producing *ukiyo-e* (literally translated as pictures of floating world) prints, books, and *bira,* announcements that were a combination of poster and flyer. These were forerunners of modern mass communication. There is also a tradition of *bijinga* in *ukiyo-e* prints.

The paintings and posters produced by the weavers' associations give us clues about the images of women that appealed to consumers and about the trends in kimono. But above all, they reflect new marketing methods that these traditional textile makers employed, and the economic factors based on production and profit that enabled the weavers' associations to invest large sums of money for promotion.

The textile industry took a dramatic turn from cottage industry to modern industrial system in late 19th century Japan. The most urgent concern of the new government was resistance to the Western encroachment that had already ensnared their country in a web of unequal treaties with various countries, including the United States.[5] Resistance required rapid industrialization and modern armaments. In the beginning of the new era, strategic industry related to military defense was established by the government, but it was soon followed by production of consumer goods, the most important of which was textiles. After an initial boost of government support, privately owned machine silk-reeling and cotton-spinning industries became the first companies in Japan to develop extensive factory production. In 1882, when the government had just begun to sell its major enterprises to private industrialists, textile mills accounted for one-half of all private factories and employed three-quarters of all factory workers in the country. The textile industry utilized an untapped labor source as women formed a large proportion of the labor force during the first periods of Japan's industrialization. In 1900, female workers made up 62 percent of the labor force in private sector, and ten years later the percentage of women and girls working in private plants had risen to 71 percent of the labor force.[6] This pattern would remain long after the Meiji period had ended. During the first decade of the new era, daughters of well-to-do farming families and *shizoku,* former ruling-class families now in need of livelihood, went to work in the new silk mills, but thereafter the female workers in both silk and cotton plants tended to be from poor peasant families.[7] These

female textile factory workers who came from villages as well as farm women who were involved in sericulture, filature, and weaving in their own rural areas all played important roles in production and consumption of *meisen* textiles in the first half of the twentieth-century Japan. A demographic shift from rural to urban areas occurred in early twentieth century during which time major department stores were established along with the network of local, regional, and metropolitan wholesalers. Most major department stores in Japan, like dry goods stores in the West, were formerly either *gofukuya* or *gofuku sho*, shops which dealt with Japanese kimono and related textiles and accessories, or *furugisho*, which dealt with used kimonos. The stores such as Takashimaya, Mitsukoshi, Matsuzakaya, Shirokiya, Isetan, and Daimaru played an important role in developing and marketing kimono cloths by giving directions in design, forecasting trends, organizing shows and special sales, and advising on promotion and presentation.

In 1930 (Showa 5) National *Meisen* Federation (*Zenkoku Meisen Rengokai*) was formed,[8] uniting eleven major *meisen* production centers, with regional *meisen*-weaving associations previously had been formed in Hachioji, Isesaki, Ashikaga, Chichibu, Kiryu, Han'nou, Tatebayashi, Murayama, Oume, Sano, and Tokorozawa. Chart for *meisen* production by eleven centers is in Appendix 1. The timeline showing the World Fairs and historical eras, Edo, Meiji, Taisho, Showa in Appendix 2 places the textile industry in a global context.

According to the *meisen* production chart, in 1912, Isesaki produced 636,747 *hiki* (approximately 24 yards of 14-inch-wide kimono cloth per unit) far more than second-ranking Chichibu (374,424) or Hachioji (170,595) or Kiryu (152,007). At that time, Ashikaga's production (74,592) was less than 12% of Isesaki's, yet within ten years, by Taisho 10 (1921), production in Ashikaga had risen to 1,046,132, second only to Isesaki's 1,568,581. They suffered a sharp decline over the next seven years, however, due to the fact that their mass-produced products were of inferior quality. (In 1922 production fell to 699,166.) Alarmed by this loss, textile makers in Ashikaga formed Ashikaga *Meisen* Association in 1927. They decided to take a new approach—developing and promoting a finer, more sophisticated image for Ashikaga *meisen*. Assisted by the Takashimaya Department Store, the makers were able to commission some of the best painters of the period who were well known for their mastery of the *bijinga* genre. The paintings depicted different types of women in kimono; each is evocative and engaging in a special way.

[Fig. 1, date unknown] This earliest painting in the collection is by Ito Shinsui (1898–1972), one of the last masters of *ukiyo-e* style painting who specialized in the subject of feminine beauty. This young woman with up-to-date hair style—not traditional but tastefully stylish—shows Western influence. The kimono seems more like *omeshi*, a kind of heavy crepe, which is a bit classier material than *meisen*. With a touch of art deco in the color and design, the kimono is somewhat subdued for a young woman, yet the use of light-blue delicately embroidered decorative color for the classical grape vine design on her *obi* sash and her bright red tinted *obiage* scarf reveal her youthful poise.

[Fig. 2, 1928] Painting by Kitano Tsunetomi (1880–1947) which we refer to as "Mona Lisa of Ashikaga" because of her mysterious and provocative gaze. Viewing her in person is an experience most people cannot forget. She too wears hair in the contemporary *mimikakushi* style (literally "covering ears"). The exotic bird design on her kimono is rather European with a touch of art nouveau. The background with its modern interpretation of the traditional chrysanthemum pattern can be associated with *meisen* design.

[Fig. 3, date unknown] This beauty by a talented woman painter, Kajiwara Hisako (1896–1988), certainly epitomizes a woman of the bourgeoisie. Intellectual and independent minded, she is wearing her hair short in a completely Western style permanent wave and sitting in a modern-looking chair.

[Fig. 4, 1935] One of the three best young painters in Kyoto in the early 1920s, Nakamura Daizaburo (1898–1947), painted a fresh, serious young girl wearing a large floral pattern with splashes of colors in bold juxtaposition. This kimono definitely gives an impression of the *meisen* design acchieved by the *han heiyou* technique, which was Ashikaga's main *meisen* product.

[Fig. 5, date unknown] The classical beauty in this autumn scene by Kobayakawa Kiyoshi (1899–1948) could be a young wife in tasteful yet elegantly bold kimono with traditional hairdo.

[Fig. 6, 1934] This is by Yamakawa Shyuhou, another Kyoto painter known for modern style of *bijinga* paintings. The design on the kimono depicting oversized peony blossoms in a non-traditional color combination gives an interesting edge to a traditional costume. The young woman's hairstyle and slightly timid gaze gives her the appearence of naivité. It balances traditional and modern elements and must have appealed to many young women at that time.

Whether worn by a fashionable woman student or an upper-class housewife with a sense of adventure—the kimonos in these painting as well as the idealized-woman types represented spoke vividly to the consumers. Those enticing images were made into large posters and framed to decorate public spaces and large department stores, which had many branches. The national promotion of Ashikaga *meisen* was aggressively practiced, accompanied by its regional folk song and dance. The painted images were often printed onto postcards or, in the summer, onto round fans, which were given to customers as advertisement.[9] Despite the fact that these weavers were the last to join the *meisen* bandwagon, forming the Ashikaga *Meisen* Weavers Association at the late date of 1928, the center was able, by investing in design and aggressive promotion, to reach the top in quantity of *meisen* textile production in less than ten years by 1933.

During the Taisho period, movies were welcomed by both working and middle classes as a new form of entertainment. Trends were embraced quickly and widely in the society as never before. Western images permeated urban Japanese lives and were then filtered through various interpretations, turning up in surprising places. Many of the *meisen* designs on kimonos seem odd to modern viewers. Stained-glass patterns, abstract expressionist painting, Mondrian, Egyptian motifs, and occidental flowers like roses and tulips are but a few examples.

Long-standing leaders in fine *kasuri, hogushi,* and *heiyou meisen,* Isesaki *meisen* producers also used the *Meisen* Beauty posters, even earlier than Ashikaga. The Shimojo collection of Isesaki weaving posters provide a valuable record of the annual *meisen* trends from the

1910s through 1950s, interrupted by World-War-II, as seen in Figures 7 and 8. Famous actress Mizutani Yaeko was one of the "Isesaki Meisen Girls," like Isabella Rossini who was the cover girl for Lancome in the USA.

[Fig. 7, 1936]

[Fig. 8, 1931]

Government, department stores, and active *meisen* makers also began holding "expositions" or seasonal trade shows as early as the end of 1900s. For the first time in history, kimono cloths were sewn into kimomos and were displayed on mannequins to the customers. Another ingenious touch to this new marketing technique was that, each mannequin or bolt had a caption defining the "look," for example, Berkeley hip, New York chic, Southern Belle, or a name suggesting a specific look, such as the Patty (casual/country), the Elizabeth (New England/ debutante). In the photographs of such seasonal shows, found in the Sakazen Mill album in Chichibu, a bolt of *meisen* cloth called *Ochanomizu-meisen* is shown, which seemed to suggest a "college girl" or "Ivy League" look. Coming up with new designs every season to compete with the huge number of weavers and makers in each relatively small area required constant innovation in technology, the creation of exciting designs, and reaching out to the appropriate market. Many *meisen* producers used these expositions and sales to promote own regional production. Ashikaga makers not only distributed posters, postcards, or fans but they were accompanied by privated label regional folk song or Ashikaga weavers' songs composed by popular song writer of early Showa, Yamanaka Shinpei, and illustrated by well known illustrator, Takehisa Yumeji, as seen in Figure 9.[10]

[Fig.9, 1929] cover of Ashikaga songs, block print.

Since this group of textiles was considered common (used by middle- and lower-class women in great quantities), for many years they were not considered worthy of collecting. Some of the centers later became known for weaving functional *meisen* textiles for futon, *zabuton*, and *noren* (cloth hung in doorways during the summer). These utilitarian tex-

tiles are considered to be of a different or lesser rank. Until we formed the *Meisen* Study Group in early 1996, the people of Chichibu, known for its production of textiles and cement, did not feel that they had something in their history to be proud of. Although our research has unearthed a huge amount of information from previously unexamined, and almost forgotten sources about a relatively recent period in Japanese history, we have only just begun to scratch the surface of this subject.

Endnotes

[1] We found over 150 names identifying different types of *meisen* kimono cloth, for example, *jogakko-meisen, men-meisen,* and *bunka-meisen*.

[2] Rebecca A. T. Stevens and Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, editors, *The Kimono Inspiration: Art and Art to Wear in America*, 150-152.

[3] *Isesaki Orimono Kumiai Hyakunesnshi* , (100 Year History of Isesaki Weaving Association), 235-479. The process of decline in the post-World-War-II era, silk kimono textile industry is vividly documented through their experience.

[4] Ashikaga City Art Museum , *Ashikaga Meisen Poster Genga* Exhibition Brochure, 1994, 1.

[5] Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization,* 3-4.

[6] Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, 44-46.

[7] Gail Lee Bernstein, ed., *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, 219-221.

I must add that as I read more about feminist history in Japan, a picture of stronger and more independent-minded women emerged. Contrary to the common belief that the mill workers were generally indentured by agreement between the girl's family and the factory, it seems that for some women and girls, becoming factory workers was the only way to obtain independence from their families.

[8] Waseda University Keizaishi Gakkai, ed., *Ashikaga Orimono-shi* (History of Ashikaga Weaving).

[9] A friend who grew up in Texas in the days before air conditioning told me that she remembers the same kind of fans; only the ones she remembers were advertising funeral homes.

[10] Ashikaga City Art Museum, *Yumeji to Ashikaga to Meisen* Exhibition Brochure, 1998, 2-3.

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See paper by Masanao Arai for Appendix 2: Historical Timeline

Appendix 1: MEISEN TEXTILE PRODUCTION PER CITY (compiled by Meisen Association)

YEAR	HACHIOJI	ISESAKI	ASHIKAGA	CHICHIBU	KIRYU	HANNO	TATEBAYASHI	OUME	TOTAL
Taisho Period (1912)									
1	170,595	636,747	74,592	374,424	152,007	45,891	0	0	1,454,257
2	183,145	572,341	142,640	398,694	224,165	53,418	0	0	1,574,403
3	197,020	534,486	112,146	335,456	136,825	32,982	0	0	1,348,915
4	198,005	450,557	510,886	359,600	165,723	31,616	3,012	0	1,719,399
5	256,689	542,211	536,112	391,699	160,907	37,567	8,310	0	1,933,495
6	276,142	627,232	355,458	423,250	190,198	42,720	55	0	1,915,055
7	289,640	819,377	404,071	528,114	229,201	54,051	0	0	2,324,754
8	289,181	990,912	510,595	646,363	366,581	63,581	92,345	0	2,959,558
9	442,900	1,039,916	351,977	569,928	213,501	65,017	23,075	33,051	2,739,365
10	636,102	1,568,581	1,046,132	879,095	408,014	72,726	109,517	38,202	4,758,369
11	713,305	1,559,631	699,166	778,414	343,197	67,461	294,405	46,402	4,501,981
12	633,972	1,567,956	674,787	800,269	371,396	65,046	519,372	52,712	4,685,511
13	772,807	1,581,862	421,097	846,164	347,808	65,525	236,526	53,812	4,325,631
14	805,022	1,490,358	292,246	922,469	211,076	67,009	49,130	59,868	3,897,177
Showa Period (1926)									
1	863,002	1,558,584	304,901	948,184	240,811	63,219	23,586	73,335	4,075,387
2	881,737	1,814,862	557,054	1,037,194	208,862	62,618	12,006	87,817	4,662,146
3	1,095,805	2,059,520	952,350	1,045,220	199,571	84,271	6,915	89,949	5,533,601
4	972,103	1,950,135	1,193,350	804,387	198,747	64,828	31,758	78,991	5,396,998
5	921,979	2,283,268	1,633,506	1,022,213	207,763	80,798	106,846	92,784	6,522,982
6	831,494	2,072,328	1,753,997	999,733	218,140	67,049	123,316	96,232	6,379,527
7	727,508	1,926,658	1,797,265	1117,041	203,858	56,342	105,072	104,017	6,338,348
8	665,098	1,511,805	1,725,529	981,208	85,763	70,211	233,622	107,812	5,700,019
9	563,021	1,396,755	1,711,518	1295,653	17,851	87,691	33,703	147,254	5,546,979
10	479,663	1,019,408	1,357,022	1186,218	8,457	79,183	11,655	77,199	4,521,096
11	357,342	281,454	368,066	943,090	0	63,235	178	60,724	2,190,067
12	123,811	60,032	14,873	612,012	0	29,123	3	9,978	882,624

MEASURED UNIT: 1 Hiki = 24 Yards

*Production from Murayama and Sano between Showa 4 -12 has not been listed on chart. Total production includes information that is not listed. Population of Japan in Taisho 9 (1920) was 55.5 million, in Showa 6 (1931) it was 65 million

———*Zenkoku Meisen Seisan Tokeihyo* (National *Meisen* Production Data), Zenkoku *Meisen* Renmeikai, 1937.