
Efficacy of Material Culture and Semiotics in Developing Cultural Understanding of Textile Artifacts with Limited Provenance: Elucidating Meanings of Japanese Textile Artifacts for a Museum Audience

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Introduction. Dress communicates ideas about an individual's self that mirror time and society. One's identity may be revealed through body modification, supplements, and often most explicitly, through apparel. Prown (1982) posits "a high correlation between clothing and personal identity and values," since individuals take clothing criticism personally (p. 13). In Japan, the variety of colors, materials, techniques, and motifs used in their traditional garments, rather than cut and construction, indicate gender, class, status, and the current zeitgeist (Jackson, 2015). Motifs in kimono and obi often have auspicious significance coming from religious and popular beliefs and allude to an individual's virtues, reflect emotions, and demonstrate season or occasion (Jackson, 2015). A university museum's exhibit of Japanese works of fine and applied art, including textiles, was the impetus for this study of historical Japanese textiles. The exhibit—Contemplate Japan—encouraged viewers to understand Japanese culture and aesthetics through the exhibited artifacts. While the university had a variety of kimono in the collection to display, little contextual information was known about each kimono or obi. The lack of information produced a deficiency in educational material for museum attendees to consume.

Purpose. The purpose of this study was to examine a sample of Japanese kimono, yukata, and obi in a university collection; identify the motifs present on the objects; and explore how the motifs represent values relevant to Japanese cultural practices throughout time. With this information, museum texts and educational materials were to be created. In this study, material culture analysis (Prown, 1982) and semiotics were used to analyze the kimono and obi selected for exhibition and elucidate their meanings found in their motifs.

Literature Review. Material culture is "the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time" (Prown, 1982, p. 1). Semiotics explains the process for understanding the message conveyed by an object. Any element of any object which represents something other than itself is considered a sign (Deely, 1990). Prown (1982) indicates that clothing, due to its combination of function and style, is a rich source for cultural understanding through material culture analysis. Studies by Areo and Kalilu (2013), Tibbs (2012), and Eastop (2007) supported the formulation of a hypothesis that material culture through a semiotic lens can be useful for interpreting textile artifacts to be presented in a museum exhibit. Based on the literature review, the following research question was developed: How can material culture and semiotics be used to understand the meanings of symbols found in Japanese textiles selected from a university museum's collection?

Method. Ten to twelve artifacts were desired by the head curator of the Contemplate Japan exhibit. By analyzing a museum spreadsheet of the artifacts that had pictures, notes, and dates;

removing twenty-nine garments from storage and examining for artisan techniques and general condition; and comparing assumed levels of audience fascination, a curation of nine kimono, one yukata, and two obi were chosen for exhibition.

The first step was using material culture object analysis (Prown, 1982) to study the textile artifacts. Phases included: (a) description, (b) deduction, and (c) speculation. Descriptions of each textile artifact were observed and recorded. This included (a) substance such as fiber content, fabric structure, surface design techniques; (b) content or subject matter of motifs present; and (c) form such as color, texture and how they interact with motifs, and overall motif placement. With the knowledge gained in the description step, deduction commenced to understand the intended user, occasion, and formality of the garment. With this evidence, speculation was pursued regarding how the motifs and colors used in the textile artifacts conveyed information about Japanese culture and aesthetics.

The second step was semiotic analysis to uncover the meaning of individual motifs; the relationships between motifs, color and material; and what these meanings imparted about traditional Japanese culture and values. Motifs and their meanings were identified by studying secondary sources cataloging Japanese design (Baird, 2001; Columbia University, 2020; Dalby, 2001; Dower, 1971; Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2020; Jackson, 2015; Kiriko Made, 2019; Matsuyama, 2017; Melissa, n.d.; NPO “Wano School”, n.d.; Richman-Abdou, 2017; Tachiichi Co. Ltd., n.d.; Wong, 2018; Yang & Narasin, 1989).

Findings and Discussion. The most popular ground color was red, which was seen on three kimono. A range of 55 separate accent colors were noted. With most of the kimono having a silk and synthetic fiber content, the colors had great vibrancy. Textile techniques included freehand paste resist dyeing, stencil resist dyeing, hand embroidery, indigo dyeing, and direct printing. Kimono were found to be for varying levels of formal occasions based on materials, motifs, crests, colors, techniques, and sleeve lengths. Five kimono were found to be for women, two kimono for men, two kimono for girls, one yukata for a man, and two obi for women. 104 individual motifs were identified. Motifs were principally botanical emphasizing the respect for nature within Japanese culture. Of 58 botanical motifs identified, the most popular were chrysanthemum, plum blossom, peony, and bamboo leaves. Of 19 cultural/everyday objects, the most significant motifs were fans, the tsuzumi drum, and a collection of the folkloric Myriad Treasures (Baird, 2001). Of 14 geometric motifs, kanoko and kikko were most prevalent. Of nine landscape motifs, six were forms of water and clouds. The animals/insects category had 3 cranes and one butterfly motif. Motifs were predominantly found to allude to longevity, prosperity, beauty, religious reverence, and transience. Additional meaning was found in the commonality of objects’ presence through generations of Japanese life (e.g. fans, bamboo). Prown’s process for material culture analysis (1982) was especially helpful for studying the Japanese garments. With the artifacts’ emphasis on surface rather than form, each object’s interpretation may be likened to analyzing not only an object of adornment, but also a fine artwork.

Outcomes and Future Work. Didactic labels were produced for each object, an educational handout with motifs was created, and a 45-minute educational program was developed and presented to 56 community and university-related participants. One participant was a retired faculty member of the University’s apparel department with expertise in cultural dress. She noted that she was enlightened by the presentation and learned new things about the kimonos she had

once studied in years past. The culmination of this research has significantly increased the body of knowledge regarding the collection of Japanese garments. Further research is suggested regarding the age of the artifacts in relation to the motifs employed to determine if some motifs were more popular during certain time periods and thus the related cultural shifts.

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