

Japanese Traditional Clothing & Culture

By Ichida Hiromi

THE Palazzo Vecchio in Florence is an Italian Gothic masterpiece constructed at the beginning of the 14th century. The World Heritage palace is located in the historic heart of Florence, which has been a sister city of Kyoto for the past 40 years.

In October 2004, we held a kimono fashion show in the palace in the Hall of the Five Hundred on the second floor, which is decorated with gorgeous frescoes. We were told that it was the first time a fashion show had ever been held there.

Before the show, we walked to the palace, some of us in long-sleeved kimonos, others in kimonos worn on formal visits. There were 60 of us, members of the Japan Kimono Development Association, which I chair. When we walked through the Piazza della Signoria, we came upon tourists from around the world. They pulled out their cameras, giving us another chance to pose in our kimonos!

The first event on the program was a ceremony honoring a mission promoting economic ties between Kyoto and Florence. Our kimono show was next.

I started off the show by inscribing a poem I had composed for the occasion. Above the stage was a white panel covered with *washi* paper made in the Kurodani district of Kyoto. The paper was huge — 1.5m high and 5m long! I took a brush and wrote this poem in Japanese calligraphy:

Two Rivers

The Arno and the Kamogawa:
Two rivers giving life
To two cities
Where history
And tradition
And the crafts of old
Link the past to the future.
Oh rivers!
Flow on,
Keep flowing
Until your waters join together.



OUR guests remained quiet while I wrote, but when the poem was translated into Italian I am pleased to report that they clapped enthusiastically.

Then it was time for our presentation of the ancient, ceremonial kimono for court ladies called *juni-hitoe*. The kimono consists of 12 layers, one worn on top of the other. The edges of the outer robes become progressively shorter, to show off their contrasting colors. Juni-hitoe, the most

unusual ensemble, was given the name in the Edo period (1603-1867). In the Heian period (794-1185) it was called *nyobo shozoku* (apparel for ladies-in-waiting). At that time it had 25 or 26 layers, making for a total thickness of about 15cm at the chest.

One of our members, Wagatsuma Sayaka, played the role of a Japanese princess at Kyoto's ancient court. Two women helped her put on the costume, one standing in front of her, the other behind. First came the white *kosode* undergarment, followed by long, deep purple *hakamas* (trouser-like apparel). Next, a green *hitoe* robe, followed by *itsutsugime* in five more layers, starting with a pale pink and ending with a dark pink. Then a yellow *uchiki* robe, then a heavier outer robe, *omote*, with a woven pattern. On top of this went a short jacket-like *karaginu* garment, followed finally by a white skirt-like *mo* garment for the back. The costume was complete after she wedged a formal paper napkin *kaishi* between some folds and placed a scarlet folding fan in her hand.

While the women were dressing our model, I gave explanations from the side of the stage.

Juni-hitoe is said to date from the time of the Emperor Ichijo (reigned 986-1011). This was around the time that Murasaki Shikibu wrote the famous novel *The Tale of Genji*. The novel was not illustrated at the time, but scrolls made about 100 years after her death had illustrations faithfully depicting events in the story. These illustrations show that

ladies-in waiting at the Imperial Court took their dress code to the extreme.

Ladies-in waiting wore the *nyobo shozoku*, the most formal costume worn by aristocratic ladies in the Heian period, in the presence of the Emperor, and on formal occasions such as the *Gosechi-no-mai* dance, to pray for a good harvest of the five main grains.

This costume, designed for the ancient court of the



Emperor, is still worn by ladies in the Imperial Family on very formal occasions. This makes Japan the only country to have a royal court that wears formal clothing which keeps the same design it had 1,000 years ago.

Actually, on formal, traditional occasions the Emperor too may wear a *sokutai* court costume that was designed 1,000 years ago. And the manner of putting on these clothes remains the same, too. There are excellent reasons for holding onto old traditions, as we are still doing today.

Japanese traditional attire is based on formality and stylized beauty, and even its fabric is created with detailed craftsmanship.

THESE were some of the things I explained while presenting Japan's court dress and talking about the aesthetic sensitivities of traditional culture.

Before our "fashion show" at the Palazzo Vecchio, we had given similar shows to rave reviews in 84 other cities, including New York, Paris, Frankfurt and Montreal. Some shows were part of events such as the EU-Japan Fest, and celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Japan-Brazil Treaty of Amity, and the 20th anniversary of restored Japan-China relations. Some second- and third-generation Japanese wept nostalgic tears during our kimono shows in Mexico, Brazil, Hawaii and other cities.

Our shows go back 30 years and have varied in time and place, exhibiting everything from kimono that mark a change of social status to bridal kimono to kimono worn for each of the four seasons. Japanese traditional culture is always the underlying theme.

Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, still preserves many traditional crafts: *Kiyomizu-yaki* pottery, the *yuzen-zome* textile dyeing, *Nishijin-ori* weaving, lacquer ware, folding-fans, *washi* paper, and more. All are noted for their artisans who choose one art and practice it their whole lives.

I have traveled to about 100 countries to collect folk clothing, and now have 430 types of traditional garments from around the world. All are made by hand, and some took six months to a year to embroider or weave to perfection. They all represent a unique folk culture.

My work with Japan's folk clothing, kimono, goes back 40 years, and I hope to continue showing off its beauty and the techniques used to make kimonos.

Clothing is closely connected to etiquette, and Japanese etiquette, like that of any country, is based on reason. Social manners begin with an unspoken rule to avoid being a nuisance to other people, to avoid making them feel uncomfortable. Parents in Kyoto are quite strict when it comes to teaching their children etiquette!

Even today, when I make tea I place one hand on the top of the teapot without being conscious of doing so. This is one



thing we were taught to do when we were young.

In Japan, it is no longer common for three generations to live under the same roof. This is unfortunate because our traditional culture, generally transmitted by grandparents, includes an observance of seasonal changes in clothing, food and life in the home.

Celebrating the end of one season and the beginning of the next is a part of traditional sensitivities, too. I feel, however, that Japan may now be leaving behind some parts of its culture as its civilization advances.

JS

Ichida Hiromi is a chairperson of the Japan Kimono Development Association.