

# The Development of the Kimono

By Nobuo Tsuji



Kakayuraku-zu (detail), Tokyo National Museum

The *kosode* is the predecessor of the kimono. In ancient times, it was worn by the common people as a working garment and by the aristocracy as an undergarment. Later, with the emergence of the samurai class, the *kosode* came to be worn as an outer garment, even on occasions calling for elaborate dress. As a consequence, the *kosode* soon reached new heights in design and decorative elegance.

In the 16th century, Japanese textiles burst forth with a boldness and innovation of design that went well beyond traditional native motifs and the finely wrought patterns of imported Ming brocades. Plant motifs were very popular during this period and showed a lively disregard for symmetry or balance. A Portuguese missionary who visited Japan around this time was amazed at the gaily colorful apparel worn by men and women alike.

Now belonging to the Tokyo National Museum, the *Kakayuraku-zu* or *Merry-making under the Cherry Blossoms* by Kano Naganobu (1577–1654) consists of a six-fold screen that depicts a group of

young men and women enjoying themselves under blossoming cherry trees. All the figures are wearing such colorful *kosode* it is hard to distinguish the men from the women.

Gradually, as the custom of wearing *kosode* spread among the common people of the Edo period (1603–1868), the more colorful designs came to be worn exclusively by women. The motifs and depictions became increasingly complex. So ostentatious did *kosode* become that the Tokugawa government banned the wearing of elaborately embroidered and tie-dyed *kosode* by the common people. All this did, however, was to transfer the decoration from embroidery and the like to dyeing, which in turn gave rise to the now-famous *yuzen* dyeing technique said to have been invented by Miyazaki Yuzen in the Edo period. This technique involved outlining motifs with a rice paste solution and made it possible to create detailed pictorial designs.

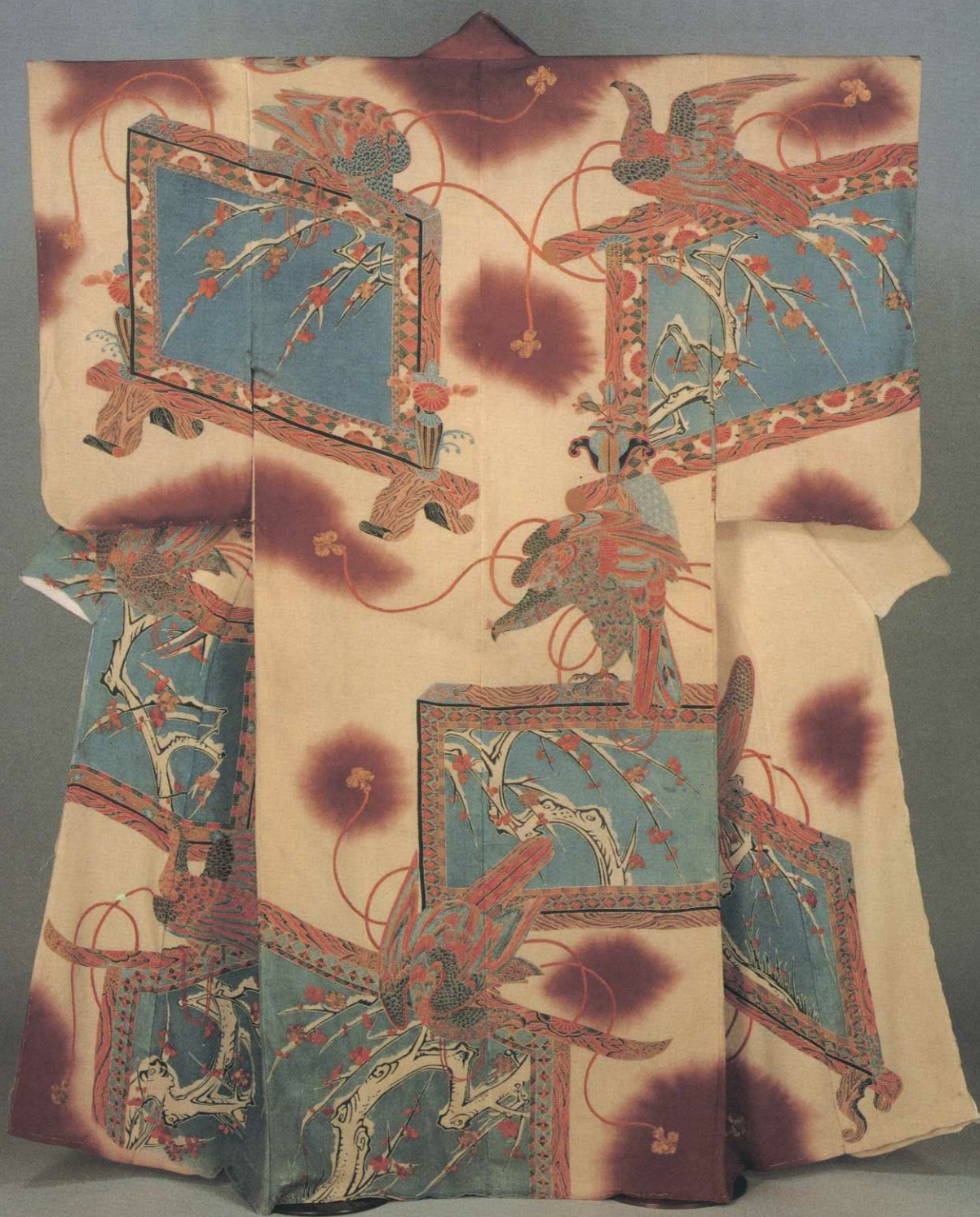
Pictured here is an early-17th-century *yuzen* masterpiece (also belonging to the Tokyo National Museum), a *kosode* decorated with an elaborate painting of hawks

perched on screen partitions against a pastel yellow crepe background. We can see the fine detail of the hawks' feathers and the decorative framework of the screens. Each of the four screens pictures winter plums covered with snow against a dark blue background. Careful examination reveals that the various branches on the four screens combine to form a single tree. This kind of technique—using several segments of the same scene like a multiscreen television with some of its panels on the blink—was indicative of the quest for innovative designs.

The introduction of Western clothing in the Meiji era (1868–1912) gradually eclipsed the *kosode* from everyday wear. But the *yuzen* tradition remains alive in the kimono, which is still the modern young woman's preferred, albeit perhaps the most expensive, dress for such special occasions as graduations and weddings.

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*Taka-tsuitate-monyo Kosode*, Tokyo National Museum