



The arrival of spring this year has been marked by the lockdown and difficulties due to COVID-19, but nevertheless the bright light and colours of the season have arrived in our streets, gardens, and parks. This issue of The Japan Society Review hopes to bring some of that beauty also into your homes featuring the review and some astonishing images of the exhibition *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* opened at the Victorian & Albert Museum in London last February. Although temporarily closed now, the exhibition aims to present the kimono as a dynamic and constantly evolving icon of fashion. It displays rare 17th and 18th century kimono alongside pieces by major designers and iconic film costumes, together with other clothing and art works.

While we wait for museums and galleries to reopen, books are one of the most inspiring and easily available distractions. In this April issue we have reviewed four fictional works written by female writers. Rather than

offering a unified 'feminine' approach or style, these readings show a wide range of literature created by women, in this case by Japanese authors Onda Riku and Matsuda Yoko, Japanese American writer Julie Otsuka and the collaboration team of British author Kerry Drewery with Japanese illustrator Natsko Seki. Through their works, we can explore the trauma and legacy of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima, the past experiences of Japanese migrants to the US or the contemporary twist of genres such as crime fiction and ghost stories.

To finish, just a reminder that you can find more reviews and all past issues on our website www.japansociety.org.uk/reviews where you can search for them by type (books, films, theatre & stage, events) and download past issues in pdf.

Good reading and please stay safe and well.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *The Last Paper Crane* by Kerry Drewery
- 2) *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka
- 3) *The Aosawa Murders* by Onda Riku
- 4) *Where the Wild Ladies Are* by Matsuda Aoko
- 5) *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* Exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum

Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Duncan Bartlett, Jill Dobson, Charlotte Goff, Laurence Green and Azmina Sohail.

Image: Fashionable brocade patterns of the Imperial Palace, woodblock print, made by Utagawa Kunisada, 1847-1852, Japan. Museum no. Circ.636 to Circ. 638– 1962. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Last Paper Crane

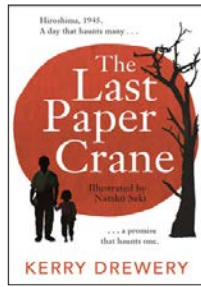
by Kerry Drewery

illustrated by Seki Natsko

Hot Key Books (2020)

ISBN-13: 978-1471408472

Review by Laurence Green



There is an interesting trend occurring in popular literature right now that one could reasonably approach as kind of writerly equivalent to the well-documented observation of so-called 'dark tourism' - the visiting of places historically associated with death and tragedy. Perhaps the most prominent example is the recent runaway success *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and the numerous spin-offs and copy-cat releases that have followed in its wake. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 has not been immune to this trend either, with the recent release of *The Complete Story of Sadako Sasaki and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, a slim tome aimed at middle-schoolers with an attractive manga-style cover that aims to retell the true-life story of Sasaki Sadako, the Japanese girl famous for folding one thousand origami cranes prior to her death from the aftereffects of the atomic bomb.

Kerry Drewery's *The Last Paper Crane* at first glance finds itself slotting neatly alongside this kind of material, although the author is keen to note and acknowledge in the book's introduction the sensitivities around who has the right to retell these stories. Most interesting is her description of how her awareness of the subject was born, in fact, from a very British kind of atomic fear. Growing up in the Cold War climate of the 1980s, she writes about how her consumption of iconic atomic-themed narratives such as the TV movie *Threads*, David Bischoff's *WarGames*, Raymond Brigg's *When the Wind Blows* and even songs like Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Two Tribes* fostered an interest in the topic. 'Fear pushed me to try and understand,' she claims, before stating: 'I kept thinking that if stories are only told by people who were there, then gradually everything will fade from time and memory'. That may be so, but when there are already so many remarkably powerful documentations of the disaster across a wide variety of media formats, the question remains - what can this incarnation add to the wealth of material that currently exists?

The answer, it seems, lies in a combinatory approach. Told through an interweaving of haiku, free verse and standard prose, *The Last Paper Crane* delights in flitting between mediums in an attempt to convey the essence of the Hiroshima story beyond

the simple historical facts. There is even a how-to guide and sheet of origami paper included in the back of the book so the reader can attempt to make their own paper crane. The guidance helpfully notes: 'You will probably need to make several paper cranes before yours looks really good, so you might want to practice on plain paper'. As novel as the inclusion of this interactive element is however, it is the haiku that initially offer the most impact as the book lays out its opening gambit. A young Japanese woman, Mizuki, sits with her grandfather and discusses the importance of stories, of memories - how they offer a precious opportunity to glean insights into a past that will soon be lost to time: 'Our memories weigh / Heavy on our soul, like leaves / On a dying tree'.

After just eighteen pages, the perspective shifts - narration nestled within narration. The central prose component of the book - told from the point of view of Mizuki's grandfather - throws us almost immediately into the hot, white heat of the atomic blast itself and the terrors of the immediate aftermath. The question of how to handle the narrative significance of a historical certainty that we all know will occur has presented an interesting challenge to a multitude of writers and artists who have approached the story of Hiroshima. 2016's critically-acclaimed anime feature film *In This Corner of the World* was notable in its masterful 'teasing' of the inevitable day, the days almost torturously unfurling, calendar-like as we warned to the movie's characters, all the while knowing the hardships that awaited them just around the corner. *The Last Paper Crane's* decision to largely jump straight in to the impact of the bomb itself arguably means the opportunity for this kind of slow build is lost; the focus instead turned to the intensely personal reconciliation of the main character's guilt over his actions after the bomb hits.

The tone of this prose segment is hard to judge. Perhaps it is the author's background as a Young Adult writer that shows here, but the overriding feeling is an attempt to rewrite or recast John Hershey's seminal *Hiroshima* into a guise suitable for a new, younger audience. The language is simple, blunt and unadorned - a symptom of its narrator's youth perhaps, but then, this never held back Nakazawa Keiji's peerless *Barefoot Gen* from the unimaginable devastation depicted in both its manga and anime incarnations. Beautiful as they are, the illustrations supplied by Seki Natsko here feel hushed and muted, a contemplative Hiroshima cast in silhouette. The most striking is three small, human-sized shadows laid out on a scratched, concrete

backdrop. One is clearly a child, arms outstretched, angel-like. Projected in a stark monochrome of black and grey, this is a world sucked of all life. 'They look like shadows of people', we are told, 'It's as if their souls are stuck to the ground'.

This is the narrative of Hiroshima we have encountered again and again. But *The Last Paper Crane* is not without its surprises. The first arrives as our narrator passes out in the ashes of the ruined city, only to awake weeks later in a Tokyo hospital. He is tended to by a young Japanese-American nurse called Megumi, who informs her unbelieving patient that while he has been comatose, Japan has surrendered. While the existence of Megumi as a character within the plot feels a little contrived - is she merely a foil to articulate a point about America occupying Japan? - what is harder to digest is the sudden blossoming of romance between her and the narrator. This culminates in an impossibly soppy denouement as the narrator proclaims his undying love for her: 'She is my friend, my girlfriend, my future hope, my sounding board, my compass when I'm lost, my shining light when times are dark. She is my everything, as I, I hope, am hers'.

The second surprise comes in the dawning realisation that throughout the book we have never known the name of its protagonist. When it is finally revealed, the narrative payoff is significant, and comes with all the weight caught up in the value of names themselves, as a personal identifier for a single individual, a survivor amidst countless lives rendered anonymous by the bomb. The book's last surprise is

saved for the final, and without a doubt strongest, third as the book returns to its free verse format for the final one hundred pages or so. The importance of this reveal is made obvious to readers well in advance, we know exactly what it will be, but this in many ways only adds to its resonance. While the book's earlier flirtation with romance arguably falls flat, the emotional weight here feels genuine. What is most striking about this section is just how alive it feels in contrast to the staid, monochrome feel of the prose segment - the flow of the pages feels untethered, often with merely a single word per line, and we are quickly caught up in the sheer essence of pure, unfiltered emotional essence. The poeticism is striking in its energy; the rhythm enforced by the placement of the words on the page conjuring up a thrum of intensity that the book feels like it has been searching for from its very first page. Here, it finally finds it.

One is left wondering whether this is specifically a story about Hiroshima, or rather an intriguing authorial exercise in mixing artistic mediums, filtered through the lens of Hiroshima. While the narrative content of the book is questionable, its existence as a kind of poetic, artistic 'object' is fascinating - the author's creative impulse moulded into a shape that just so happens to be designated 'Hiroshima, 1945'. Ultimately, *The Last Paper Crane* feels impossible to pigeon hole. It is its own unique creation. A little rough round the edges perhaps, but thoroughly individual in its existence as a thing of many component folds and layers. There are many tales of Hiroshima. This is merely one of them. §

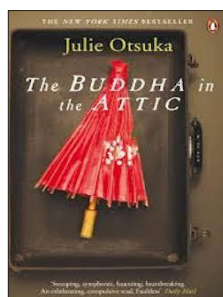
The Buddha in the Attic

by Julie Otsuka

Penguin (2013)

ISBN-13: 978-0241956489

Review by Azmina Sohail



The title of Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic* is reminiscent for many literary critics of the noted feminist book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a study of the representation of women in the nineteenth-century and their struggle for autonomy in the literary world. Otsuka, now over three decades later, uses this title to present in fictional form the struggle for Japanese identity in America at the height of the Second World War.

Based on the real life stories of Japanese immigrants who came to America in the 1900's,

Otsuka's novel is essentially a story by women for women. With a distinctive poetic narrator, she traces the migration of Japanese women from their homeland in the East to the West with the promise of the "American Dream." Travelling across oceans with the intention of a successful marriage, their transition into domesticity, the difficulties and fear of integration and their slow demise, evacuation and eventual disappearance, this story is essentially the voice of the voiceless immigrant.

What stands out is Otsuka's rhythmic narrative style; with the narrator's all-seeing, all-knowing persona, it has the ability to detail the experiences of different women into one collective story. As if one woman is telling the story of hundreds of others. As if one woman is telling only her story. And as if one woman is listening to several stories at once; a peculiar amalgamation of them all. It is this and the plurality of pronouns used that evokes a poignant sense of

sisterhood. When travelling 'on the boat we had to make choices,' when having children 'our husbands had nothing to do with them' and when leaving 'some of us left weeping.' The style is an underestimated and powerful literary tool that illustrates a collective sense of isolation and fear in a foreign land.

Thematically Otsuka's story makes use of and personifies Edward Said's theory of the 'Oriental Other.' Said's stance of the Western perception of the "strange" and "exotic" Easterner is skilfully reversed. It is the immigrants who question their Western counterparts; 'in the beginning, we wondered about them constantly ... how were they able to tell each other apart ... did they really hang dishes on their walls ... and have locks on their doors.' They wondered 'to whom did they pray? What did they dream of?' and if they 'saw a man in the moon and not a rabbit?' Perhaps in both defence and defiance of orientalism, Otsuka is conveying the questions of these immigrants in a respectful and intelligent manner. Instead of acknowledging any "barbaric" and "savage" practices, the Japanese women question the simple everyday practices of the "Other."

The tactful exploration of immigrant cultural assimilation also allows the reader to reflect on its relevance today. With a recent resurgence of racism in the West and ethnic cleansing in the East, *The Buddha in the Attic* shows us that the problems with social integration is still very much alive. The novel reminds us that ethnic minorities, religions and cultures – notions that very much exemplify the diversity of life – have somehow become "incompatible" with the modern world. Dictatorial leaders and governments akin to those of the Second World War have embedded this idea into the masses causing a widespread fear and rejection of people.

In the novel, the propaganda becomes so strong that the Japanese soon begin to suspect their own people of political play; 'they said our houseboys were intelligent agents in disguise' and 'our gardeners were all hiding shortwave radio transmitters.' Despite their husbands help, 'still, we were unprepared. Suddenly to find ourselves the enemy.' In the same manner, various ethnic minorities today have become distrusting of each other; people who once held the same shared values and beliefs now become suspects to not only the outside world but to themselves.

In its final chapter the narrator switches its perspective to the "everyday" American citizen who carefully conveys the disappearance of their immigrant neighbours. Their traces being left behind with 'abandoned cars on driveways ... houses are boarded up and empty' and businesses 'shuttered ... with official notices nailed to telephone poles ... already beginning to tatter and fade.' Some miss them and some are relieved but over time the memories of their Japanese neighbours begin to fade until eventually they can no longer recall their names; a haunting reflection of the reality of death.

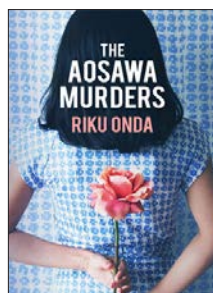
Julie Otsuka's novel of the immigrant experience is beautifully written. Its powerful narrative encapsulates the lives of a forgotten people still alive in the memories of Japan. It confronts the issue of immigrant integration head-on, holding up a mirror to contemporary society and its treatment of displaced populations. It tells us that no matter what, all immigrants experience the same sense of fear and hope; two emotions every human being will face. The novel is a salute to all the people who have experienced this type of fear and an eerie reminder that history is repeating itself. Ethnic cleansing is a reality and must be combatted, even if it means defying the biggest and most dangerous powers the world has ever seen. §

The Aosawa Murders

by Onda Riku
translated by Alison Watts

Bitter Lemon Press (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1912242245

Review by Jill Dobson



The first novel by prolific and award-winning author Onda Riku to be published in English is prefaced by a transcript of a police interview with Aosawa Hisako, the sole survivor of a mass murder that has claimed the rest of her family. Hisako, the obvious suspect, is blind;

how could she have carried out a mass poisoning? The rest of the novel unfolds from this basic premise, following multiple viewpoints, a technique that recalls Akutawaga's 1922 story *In a Bamboo Grove*, the inspiration for Kurosawa's *Rashomon*.

The Aosawas, a prominent local family in an unnamed but atmospherically described coastal town, hold joint birthday celebrations for several family members. A gift of sake is delivered, along with soft drinks for the children, in the name of a friend of the family. The drinks are used for the birthday toast. A local girl, Saiga Makiko, and her two brothers arrive late

to the celebrations and find a ghastly scene of writhing bodies and the stink of vomit. Seventeen people die. An extensive police investigation begins. The family friend has no connection to the delivery and the enquiry stalls. Then, a man known to be mentally disturbed hangs himself and leaves a suicide note claiming to have delivered the poisoned drinks. Despite the lack of motive, the evidence confirms his confession. The case is closed, and yet local people are left empty and dissatisfied, even 'depressed', because 'they still couldn't make sense of why all those people had died' (p. 35). The logistics of the murder have been clarified, but the truth of it remains essentially unresolved, and at its centre is the blind Aosawa daughter Hisako and her memory of the old, dark, blue room.

As a young woman, Saiga Makiko is still haunted by her childhood discovery of the horrific crime scene. She is driven to return to her former hometown and research the murders as way of dealing with the trauma, which 'was still with me, like a sediment that had settled deep down inside ... Over time, this sense of unease built up and felt more solid' (p. 19). She publishes a book about the murders, *The Forgotten Festival*, which she frankly describes as 'fiction': 'Nobody knows what

the truth is. It never even occurred to me to wonder if what I wrote was the truth' (p. 23)'. In the first chapter, an older Makiko reflects on her experience at the time of the murders and the process of writing the book eleven years later, responding to questions posed by an unnamed interviewer.

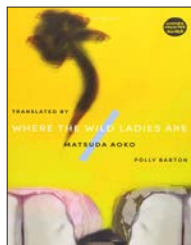
The meandering narrative moves through conversations between people who are linked in various ways to the event and the interviewer, an excerpt from Makiko's book, file notes and first-person reminiscences. There is no clear single point of view, although the reader has the impression that the mysterious interviewer is working through all the evidence at a much later date, as if piecing together an intricate puzzle. Every viewpoint is partial and open to question; does the passing of time blur memory or does distance from the emotional impact of events provide a clearer view? Onda seems to undermine the convention of (much, although by no means all) crime fiction that there is a truth to be neatly revealed, whether by logical deduction, old-fashioned shoe-leather or fancy forensic techniques. The truth of a murder, she seems to say, goes much deeper than simply who did it. §

Where the Wild Ladies Are

by Matsuda Aoko
translated by Polly Barton

Tilted Axis Press (2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1911284383

Review by Charlotte Goff



What's stopping you from getting the life you want? For the protagonist of *Smartening Up*, the second in Matsuda Aoko's newly translated ghost stories, it is her hair. If only she had remembered to epilate, she would surely never have been dumped. If only she had long, golden locks, the rest of her life would fall into place. It takes a visit from her dead aunt to make her rethink her relationship with her hair, her ideal self, and the wisdom of locating her self-esteem in the approval of others. These are not your average ghost stories. They probably won't leave you chilled to the core – though, as translator Polly Barton points out, their chilling effect is one reason that Japanese ghost stories are traditionally told in summer – but will instead leave you amused, moved, and hopefully empowered.

Of course, what we consider scary is subjective. In Nakata Hideo's *Ring*, Sadako emerging from the TV with long, black hair hanging before her is one of the

film's most chilling images. In a more mundane way, 'unruly' hair has come to be feared by women the world over. To ride the Tokyo underground is to be stared down by ubiquitous hair removal ads, and in 2018 a Japanese advertising agency made international news for repurposing models' armpits as marketing space.

For our narrator in *Smartening Up*, the rejection of this ideal is a moment of triumph. This is a ghost story but, more than that, it is a love story. Learning to embrace the power of her hair, our narrator swaps self-hatred, and a longing for everything western, for a renewed love for herself and her Japanese-ness: we see her move from consuming Dean and DeLuca groceries from a Scandinavian-style table while watching a 'romantic comedy starring Michelle Williams', to drawing inspiration from the tale of Kiyohime, visiting the local sento, and nourishing 'the black mass' inside her.

It is typical of Matsuda's tales that the transformation she undergoes is as open to the living as to the dead, and the two worlds are so interconnected throughout these tales that it can take time to work out which characters are dead. When they appear, Matsuda's ghosts are more likely to be helping the mortals than haunting them. They are benevolent,

if preternaturally persuasive. They might turn up at your apartment unannounced, but the worst that will happen is you feel obliged to share the expensive red bean sweets you had been saving for a special occasion, or end up with a few unnecessary toro lanterns. Best case scenario, you – you who are fed up with men and dumped your boyfriend after realising that living with him felt like accumulating a mound of pebbles inside – may land a spectral girlfriend who will massage your feet each night and disappear by morning. Unlike ghouls who spend their afterlives avenging past grievances, Matsuda’s ghosts have dreams and aspirations, and we see them working towards these under the guidance of the mysterious Mr Tei.

Matsuda’s tales are a joy to read, and more than live up to their promise to be feminist retellings. The real monsters in this collection are not the ghosts themselves, but the spectres created by a capitalist, patriarchal society: workplaces where women are chronically under-valued, vicious rumours which hound a single mother, and the beauty industrial complex which produces and profits from women’s self-hatred. Matsuda retains key elements of Japanese traditional folklore, such as shapeshifting, and the harmonious relationships between living and dead, while reimagining the issues they might have in contemporary Japan. [S](#)

Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk

exhibition at London’s Victoria & Albert Museum
(29 February - 21 June 2020 / exhibition postponed)

Review by Duncan Bartlett

Europe’s first major exhibition of the kimono is a celebration of the garment’s unique place in the story of global fashion. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London is showing more than 350 creations in *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*, which opened to the public on February 29th, 2020. Speaking at the opening of the exhibition, its curator Anna Jackson said:

‘We want our visitors to gain an appreciation of the significance and the sheer beauty of the kimono and we want to show that fashion is able to transcend geographic borders.’

The exhibition includes many treasures, such as an 18th century summer kimono, which is yuzen-dyed and embroidered with golden-hued cherry blossoms. It is valued at around two million yen (about £14,000 or \$18,000 USD) and it is too delicate to wear.

Despite being seen as uniquely Japanese, the kimono has had an influence on international clothing styles for nearly 400 years. The Director of the V&A, Dr Tristram Hunt, believes its allure stems from its simple structure which he believes invites people to create intricate designs upon its surface.

‘When we talk about kimonos, we often think of a beautiful and remote garment, a long way from ordinary people. This exhibition challenges that perception and it reveals that the kimono is highly dynamic. It’s been the focus of a vibrant fashion culture which has existed in Japan since the 1660s,’ Dr Hunt told reporters.



Kimono Times, Akira Times, 2017. © Akira Times

National treasures

The first part of the exhibition examines the history of the kimono, with many precious examples from Kyoto and Edo, the city which later became known as Tokyo. Some of the clothes come from the museum’s own archive – the V&A has been collecting Japanese

art and design since it was founded in the early 1850s. There are also pieces which have been borrowed from all over the world, including loans from the Tokyo National Museum and the Kyoto Costume Institute.

People have been wearing kimonos in Japan for more than a thousand years. However, it was not until the 17th century that nearly everybody – regardless of their social status, wealth or gender – began to use them on an everyday basis. By that stage, there were a huge range of styles, patterns and materials. Each type carried much significance, according to curator Anna Jackson. Speaking in front of some of the exhibits to a group of international journalists, she said: 'The surface was really important and, of course, the choice of pattern and the colour. That's how you showed other people how wealthy you were, what your social status was and, most importantly of all, how fashionable and tasteful you were.'



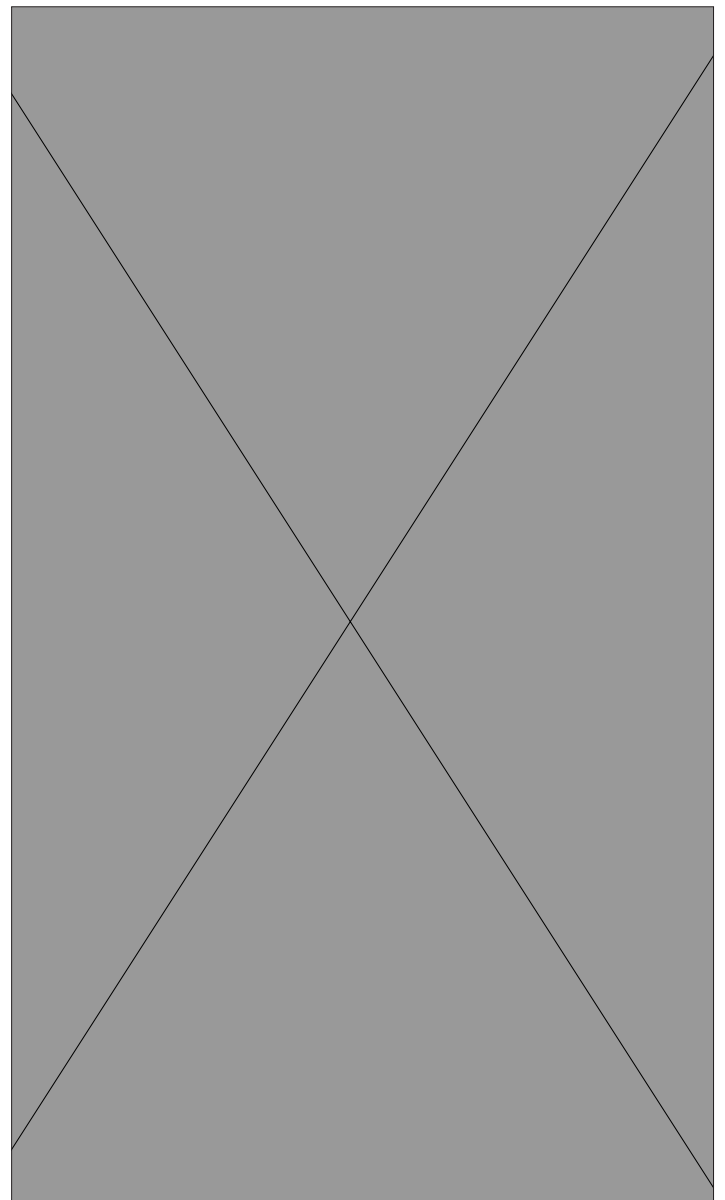
Outer-kimono for a young woman. Probably Kyoto, 1800-1830. Image Courtesy of the Joshibi Art Museum

Overwhelming demand

Some of the most fascinating exhibits date from the period between 1639 and 1853, when Japan's borders were largely closed to the rest of the world and it was

known as sakoku "the closed country." Despite this isolation, some enterprising Dutch traders purchased kimonos in Japan and shipped them back to Europe, where they tried to sell them on at a vast profit. 'At that time, Japanese manufacturers couldn't keep up with demand, so kimonos were made in India to supply the European market,' according to Anna Jackson, who is responsible for the V&A's Asian collection.

When Japan reopened its borders, western dress became popular. Yet even during the early 20th century, the majority of Japanese women continued to wear kimonos. The cut of the garment remained unchanged, but the designs were modernised. One charming painting in the V&A shows a kimono-clad woman as the epitome of modern sophistication, with a clutch bag under her arm and a fox fur draped over her shoulders.



'Kaidan' (staircase) by Kobayakawa Kiyoshi (1899-1948), hanging scroll, ink and colours on paper



Installation shot of *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Although painted in 1935, she looks strikingly contemporary. One can easily imagine her sharing a selfie on social media.

Celebrity culture

The final section of the museum emphasises that kimonos have been much appreciated internationally



Belted wrap coat, designed by Duro Olowu, Autumn/Winter 2015, England. © Duro Olowu

since the end of the Second World War. There are examples of costumes worn by celebrities such as Freddy Mercury, Madonna and Bjork.

'The kimono's timelessness and ambiguity has always made it popular with performers,' Anna Jackson said during the opening. 'It's still having a big influence internationally. There are always ways it can be deconstructed and redesigned.'

She particularly admires recent works by a new wave of designers from across the world – including many from Japan, such as Rei Kawakubo – who are part of a global a "kimono renaissance."

Olympic link

The V&A's Director, Tristram Hunt, enjoys drawing visitors' attention to an intriguing link between a celebrated kimono and the logo of the Olympic Games, scheduled to be held in Tokyo in the summer of 2020. The logo includes a checkered pattern, shown in the traditional Japanese colour of indigo blue. It was designed to convey a feeling of elegance and sophistication. The pattern is known in Japanese as Ichimatsu the name of a kabuki actor who performed during the 1740s.

Dr Hunt said: 'The checkerboard on Ichimatsu's kimono was influenced by fabrics from South Asia, which were imported into Japan by Dutch traders. I believe that this is eloquent proof that the story of fashion is so often a blurring of the unique and the universal, the familiar and the foreign.' §