

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Beautifully Dressed Skeletons in Japan's Closet

by [John Yau](#) on [October 11, 2015](#)



Marching Boys with Saber (Boy's Kimono) (c. 1937-39) (all images courtesy of Edward Thorp Gallery)

In a letter dated July 23, 1938, sent by the Japanese modernist poet Yone Noguchi to the Nobel Prize winning author Rabindrath Tagore — the first non-European to receive the award — Noguchi

wrote the following justification for his country's invasion of China, effectively ending their friendship:

Believe me, it is the war of "Asia for Asia." With a crusader's determination and with a sense of sacrifice that belongs to a martyr, our young soldiers go to the front. Their minds are light and happy, the war is not for conquest, but ... for uplifting [China's] simple and ignorant masses to better life and wisdom.

By the 1930s, Noguchi, who wrote in English and was the father of the American-born sculptor Isamu Noguchi, had become a virulent nationalist, like many of his countrymen. If you think his letter is out of touch with reality — it was written six months after the Nanking Massacre in which the Japanese army brutally murdered hundreds of thousands of civilians — you should remember that such fairytale idealism continues to manifest itself with alarming regularity.

In March 2003, Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush, stated:

We are treating the Iraqi prisoners extremely well. In fact I think they get good food and shelter and they're free from the horrible commanders they used to work for. I think most of them are much happier, frankly.



Norakuro (Boy's Kimono) (c. 1933) (click to enlarge)

I expected that more than one ugly memory or disquieting association would be apt to surface when I went to the exhibition, [Japanese Propaganda Kimonos 1905–1941](#), at the Edward Thorp Gallery (September 10–October 24, 2015), but I persisted, buoyed by Pogo the possum's wise epigram: "WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS US."

Let me interject here that I can think at of least one hundred reasons why you should go to this exhibition, despite trepidations about the works' celebration of the glories of combat. I cannot think of another show in recent memory — the Thorp press release calls it "the first New York gallery

exhibition of primarily pre-World War II Japanese Propaganda Kimonos” — that has brought the myths of war and childhood innocence into such unsettling proximity.

The traditional Japanese *kimono* is a long, T-shaped robe with wide sleeves, whose basic shape has not changed in hundreds of years. Along with *kimonos* (the singular roughly means “a thing to wear”), the exhibition includes *nagajuban* (under-robos) and *haori* (short jackets). Each is a wearable flat surface on which a picture can be embroidered or, in more modern times, printed. An American equivalent would be the Confederate flag that people wear on their clothes, as a badge of pride.



Kamikaze (Man's Haori) (1937) (click to enlarge)

The kimonos in this exhibition were made in a period bookended by the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, a period of escalating militarism and the cruel occupation of China, which began in 1931. And yet, the inventiveness of the pictures, the patterning, and the colorful evocation of war — embodied in the graphic images of such fictional and real figures as the *manga* (comic strip) soldier, Norakuro, a black-and-white dog whose design echoed Otto Mesmer's Felix the Cat, and the egomaniacal Matsuoka Yosuke, Japan's representative to the League of Nations, among many others — is almost enough to make you momentarily forget what you are looking at — fiercely nationalist propaganda. It is in that gap, when you go from marveling at the ingenious designs imprinted on kimonos to remembering the context in which they were made, that you feel a sobering chill.

The convergence of fairytale narratives with real historical events was what I found the most fascinating, delusional, distressing, creepy, weird and illuminating, especially when images glorifying war are on the clothing of a young boy or infant. On one *omiyamairi* (circa 1940), which is a swaddling robe used at the naming ceremony when a child is one month old, there is a graphic pattern of battleships and bombers worthy of a good cartoonist.

The most disturbing *omiyamairi* image is based on a news photo of General Matsui Iwane entering the gates of Nanking on December 12, 1937, shortly before he ordered his troops to massacre everyone who survived the bombing and sacking of the city. Iwane is shown seated on a horse, a righteous conqueror. One cannot imagine that the boy's parents knew what was actually going on when the naming ceremony took place. Although men and boys wore most of the propaganda kimonos, there were a few in the exhibition that were worn by women.



Nanking Omiyamairi (Boy's Omiyamairi) (c. 1937/38)

On one woman's *kimono* dating from 1944, at the height of World War II, the design is of cherry blossoms overlaid the silhouettes of Japanese Zeroes, presumably flown by *Kamikaze* pilots on suicidal missions. The meaning of the cherry blossom tree goes back hundreds of years, signifying the fleeting beauty of life, while *Kamikaze* means "Divine Wind," referring to the storms that destroyed Kublai Khan's fleets when China tried to invade Japan. According to the concise, detailed notes explaining the symbolism of each of the thirty-three robes in the exhibition, the pilots

would “paint cherry blossoms on their planes before a mission or take an actual twig of the tree with them.” The kimonos largely celebrate Japan’s military might; they don’t demonize or even show the enemy’s face. The Zero pilots don’t suffer or die; they become heroes, “their minds [...] light and happy.” The kimonos are another manifestation of the aestheticizing of war and the cult of nobly dying in battle, which stretches back at least to Homer, the epic tales of angry Achilles and cunning Odysseus.



Plums and Cherry Blossoms (Woman’s Kimono) (c. 1944) (click to enlarge)

One robe celebrates the flight of the *Kamikaze* (the term was coined, in an aeronautical context, as the name of a single plane) from Tokyo to London in 1937. Produced by the Mitsubishi Company, this was the first Japanese plane produced with Japanese technology to set an international speed record. In his animated biopic, *The Wind Rises* (2013), Hayao Miyazaki weaves together fact and dream to tell the fictionalized biography of Jiro Horikoshi, who designed the feared fighter plane the Mitsubishi A6M Zero. According to Miyazaki, the reason he took on this divisive subject was because he had heard that Horikoshi had once said, near the end of his life: “All I wanted to do was to make something beautiful.” Might not the unknown artists who designed these *kimonos* have said something similar?

[Japanese Propaganda Kimonos 1905–1941](#) continues at the Edward Thorp Gallery (210 Eleventh Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 24.

Edward Thorp Gallery Featured Japan Japanese Art kimono political propaganda Propaganda Kimonos