

ART & DESIGN

Review: Illustrated Kimonos Celebrate Japan's Once Mighty Military

By KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 17, 2015

Enlightened modern people tend to think of war as a repugnant, if sometimes regrettable necessity. At different times and places, however, it has been regarded — and still is for some cultures — as an enterprise of great moral and spiritual value. Such a positive perspective is vividly illustrated in this visually and historically fascinating exhibition of more than 30 Japanese kimonos with printed images celebrating Japanese military might. All but one are from the 1930s and early 1940s, the period when Japan invaded Manchuria, waged war against China and aligned with the Axis powers of Germany and Italy.

Created by unidentified graphic artists for men, women and children, the kimonos bear lively compositions of utmost sophistication reflecting international styles like Art Deco and Depression Modern. In patchwork patterns and suavely muted colors, they depict fighter planes, battleships, antiaircraft artillery, aerial landscapes, maps and cute children dressed as soldiers.

One of the most striking has scores of red-and-white fields of Japanese flags — rising suns and simple discs — overlapping to create an optically buzzing, near abstraction. A poetic and beautiful woman's kimono shows red-and-yellow airplanes decorated with cherry blossoms flying angelically this way and that over a background of horizontal red-and-white stripes. The image on a man's haori — a kimono-style jacket — envisions in black and white a luminous city of the future with a streamlined zeppelin and airplanes flying over blocky, modern buildings. War may be terrible, but for its victors it promises heaven on earth.

'Japanese Propaganda Kimonos, 1905-1941'

Edward Thorp Gallery

210 11th Avenue, at West 25th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 17

A version of this review appears in print on September 18, 2015, on page C23 of the New York edition with the headline: Review: Illustrated Kimonos Celebrate Japan's Once Mighty Military.



A woman's haori, circa 1940, at the Edward Thorp Gallery. Edward Thorp Gallery, New York