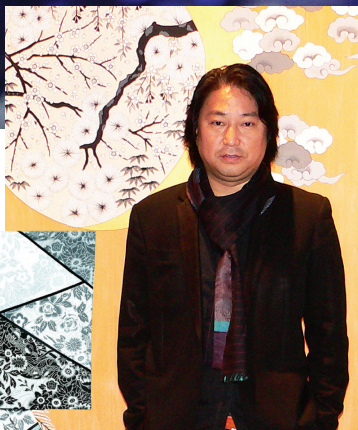


INTO THE FOLD

Barbara Balfour explores how one Japanese designer is giving the kimono a modern makeover.

as techno beats pulse in sync with the flashing lights and prismatic colours that illuminate the room, rows of kimono-clad ladies with stiffly teased hair sit straight-backed, enraptured, at legendary kimono designer Jotaro Saito's spring/summer 2015 runway show in Tokyo. Many of the attendees' grandmothers once shopped for Saito's grandfather's kimonos. For them, and for this third-generation designer, convergence is the theme of the day: modernity blending with tradition, one generation overlapping another.

For Saito, the only kimono designer in Japan whose collections are regularly featured on the runway, pushing the envelope runs in the family. His grandfather, Saizaburo, was a celebrated dye artist and the first kimono designer in history to use his own name on the label when he opened his workshop 81 years ago in Kyoto—Japan's historic capital and the country's centre of textile production for centuries. At the time, the idea of a single artist making a singular piece was unheard of. This is an idea unique to the 20th century; historically, kimono makers remained nameless. Saito's father, Sansai, also took considerable risks by mixing unconventional colours within the same garment: Combining grey (traditionally worn by older married women) and pink (historically reserved for young girls), for example, challenged social norms. Ironically, while Saito, 45, is considered a rule breaker in the kimono world for juxtaposing geometric patterns with lush florals and using metal studs and zippers as adornment and textiles like denim and fur, the garment's >



Clockwise, from bottom right: Models at the Jotaro Saito s/s 2015 show at Tokyo Fashion Week; a kimono designed by Saito's grandfather Saizaburo; Saito in his Tokyo shop

Painstakingly hand-painted and designed, Saito's kimonos range in price from 100,000 yen (about \$1,000) to 3 million yen (\$30,000).



ties to authenticity and Japanese identity are a construct of the West, says Tamara Joy, chief curator and cultural director at the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens in Delray Beach, Fla. "It was Western influence and interaction that made the kimono instantly identifiable as a Japanese national costume, even though it evolved from a Chinese robe and colour-ranking system," says Joy. "Before then, through hundreds of years of Japan's isolation, there was no outside force to say 'Look at this new style; let's change it.'"

By distancing himself from the traditional materials associated with the kimono, Saito is responsible for effectively transforming it into a garment relevant to the 21st century. "Today's Japanese designers are playing with traditional items and recontextualizing them within Western stylistic creations," says Japanese fashion expert Federica Carlotto, a lecturer at Regent's University London and a long-time researcher of the Japanese adoption of Western fashion. "They are retrieving and refreshing traditional know-how within the textile sector; they are deconstructing the body's silhouette as it has been shaped by Western clothing by presenting deformed items of clothing on the catwalks."

Saito's reinvention of the kimono comes at a time when the Japanese have a renewed interest in redefining what it means to wear the traditional garment. "Enough people wanted to be individual that our designs started taking off," says Saito, speaking through a translator in a coffee shop in Tokyo's luxe Roppongi Hills district, where his concept store is located. "Still, my father and I always talk about the importance of preserving traditions in our work. It's all about balance: You can challenge what is considered normal, but you don't want to break every single tradition." □

JOTARO SAITO'S TIPS ON HOW TO BUY A KIMONO

1.

"Buy a kimono from a store that sells them as practical wear for everyday life rather than as a traditional costume."

2.

"Choose an authentic handcrafted kimono from a reliable shop. Look for the designer's signature on the lower front of the garment; this is proof that it is the real deal."

3.

"Buy something that truly appeals to you; arranging and adjusting the kimono to fit with your personal style is a good thing. Wearing it should make you feel luxurious."

SIGN LANGUAGE

Deciphering motifs on traditional Japanese kimonos.



●..... SYMBOLIZE➤ **SPRING**



●..... SYMBOLIZE➤ **LONGEVITY**



●..... SYMBOLIZES➤ **UNDYING LOVE**

EAST MEETS WEST

Japanese-inspired looks from the s/s 2015 runways.



GETTY IMAGES (MAIN IMAGE); MAXTREE (RUNWAY); MARIANA LEUNG ("THE COLOUR PURPLE"); PAUL MAC ("CRANES" & "CHERRY BLOSSOMS")