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Japanese War Motif Textiles: The (Social) Aesthetics of War

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Klaus J. Frieze

Thursday
2025-12-04
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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At the center of this paper are the countless textiles depicting modern war scenes that have been produced in Japan beginning with the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war and continuing during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 to the Shōwa period. Between 1931 and 1942 textiles depicting modern war technology, tanks, airplanes and (happy looking boy) soldiers were sold to the Japanese mass market. Most of these war motif textiles were everyday clothes worn by all age groups and genders; they were cut in the Japanese style (e.g. kimono or *haori* jackets) and (probably less frequently) Western styles. These garments are part of a larger world of war themed material culture; this paper locates them at the conjuncture of (social) aesthetics, fashion, commercial interests and politics. In Western scholarship, these textiles are best known as “propaganda kimonos”; however, this name obscures many aspects and foregrounds visual appearances over the actual practices of embodiment related to these objects. Textiles not only serve to display the designs but shelter and affect their wearers in many more complex ways.

For example, the war motif textiles facilitated a bodily experience of the (changing) national identity during war times. The Japanese cut made their wearers feel comfortable. At the same time, as the patterns often included maps, globes and even images of tourism, these textiles operated as a sensory medium through which their owners literally could feel their place in the world from the comforts of home. As another example, the war themed textiles worn by children were a way to express the role of women in the war effort and also could serve as a quasi “magical” protection of the beloved kids. In addition, it can be argued that the symbolic depiction of strength on the textiles constitutes a way of dealing with fears about the war instead of showing unwavering support. By facilitating the actual embodiment of different meanings the textiles contributed to the agency of their owners. Ambiguous (and sometimes even contradictory) practices show how material culture is an integral part of social aesthetics through which war is normalized and included in everyday life.



Klaus J. Frieze is a Lehrbeauftragter (contract lecturer) at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology of Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, and, in addition, co-curator of the exhibition “Kabuki – Japanese Theater” opening October 2026 at the ethnographic Museum Five Continents, Munich. He holds a PhD in cultural anthropology from Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, and in East Asian art history from the University of Zurich for his thesis titled “Aesthetics of War: Japanese War Motif Kimonos”. His current research focuses on Japanese everyday culture (especially textiles) as well as art and other popular media such as woodblock prints in the context of Japan’s war times; on this topic he has published various articles.

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