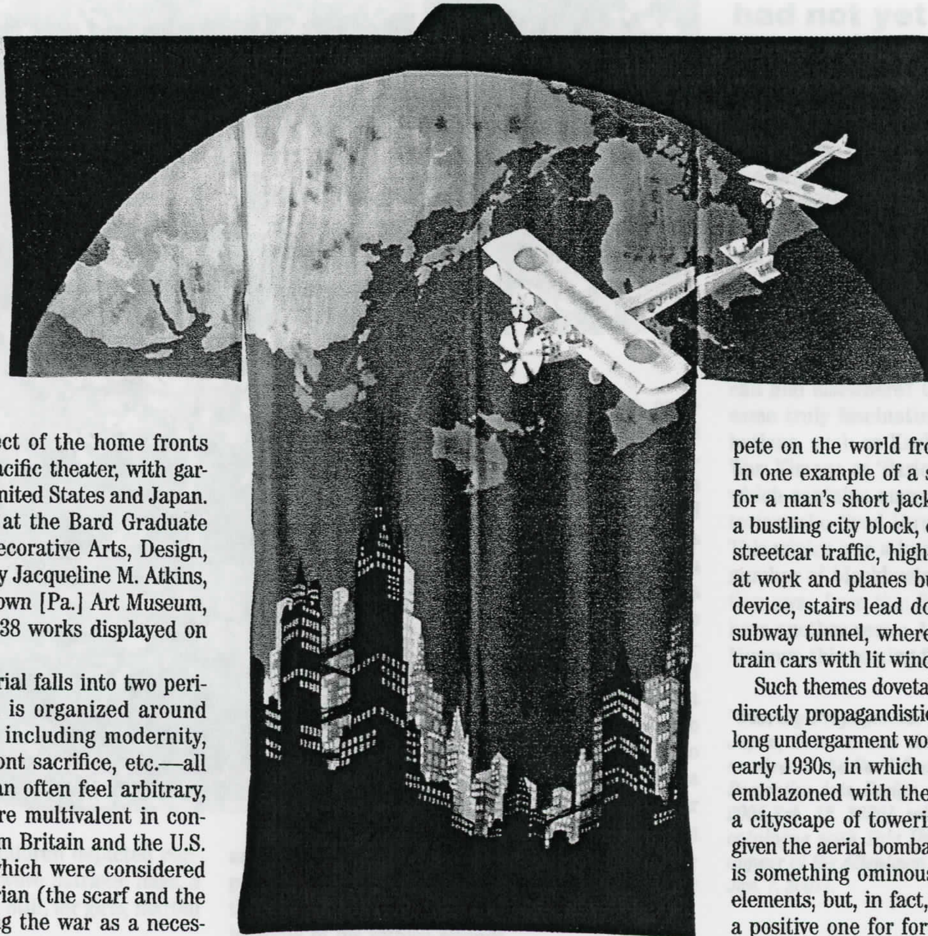
Wrapped in the State

An exhibition of World War II-era clothing with propagandistic themes illustrates the personal dimensions of home-front mobilization.

BY FAYE HIRSCH

It may be difficult for many U.S. citizens living now, during the Iraq War, which directly involves such a small percentage of the population and seems so far away, to understand that there was once a time when war touched almost all aspects of daily life. A traveling exhibition of propagandistic clothing produced before and during World War II sheds light on an under-examined aspect of the home fronts in nations engaged in the Pacific theater, with garments made in Britain, the United States and Japan. First mounted in New York at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, and organized by Jacqueline M. Atkins, textiles curator at the Allentown [Pa.] Art Museum, the show gathers together 138 works displayed on walls and mannequins.



Man's **nagajuban**, *"City Skyline," Japan, early 1930s,* **yuzen**-*dyed silk, 52¾ by 51¼ inches. Collection Tanaka Yoku, Tokyo.*

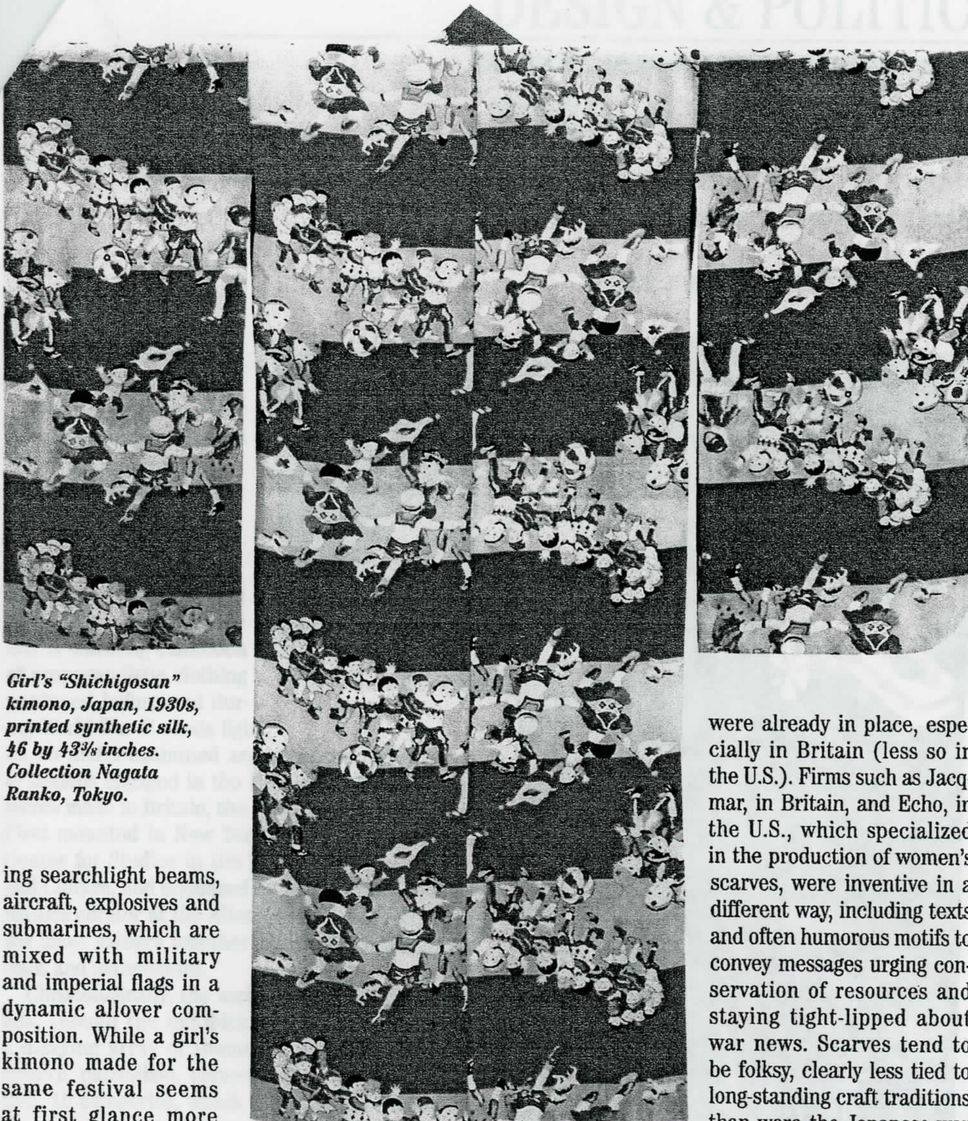
Chronologically, the material falls into two periods, though the exhibition is organized around a dizzying array of themes including modernity, empire, patriotism, home-front sacrifice, etc.—all told, 10 categories, which can often feel arbitrary, since many of the images are multivalent in content. Most of the objects from Britain and the U.S. are women's headscarves, which were considered both fashionable and utilitarian (the scarf and the snood being promoted during the war as a necessity for tying the hair back while doing factory work); they date to the 1940s, when the Allies had fully entered the war. In contrast, the garments from Japan, which are more various—luxury kimonos, ceremonial garb for children, obi (outer sashes for kimonos), jackets and *juban* (undergarments for kimonos), etc.—date to the 1930s, when Japan was flush from successful imperial enterprises, particularly in China. Sumptuary restrictions due to scarcity had not yet been imposed. It helps to be reminded that Japan was involved in bellicose operations in Asia and the Pacific for a longer period of time than the other nations. The historical parameters of this show are set at the Manchurian Incident in 1931 on one end and the surrender of Japan in 1945 on the other.

The exhibition excels most particularly in these Japanese items. The long history of silk stencil-dyeing (*yuzen*) in Japan, combined with a taste—dating to the Meiji period (1868-1912) onward—for *omoshirogara*, or novelty designs, produced some spectacularly inventive treatments of contemporary themes. *Yuzen* dyeing had already been adapted to less expensive mass-produced textiles in wool, cotton and synthetic fibers by the period under discussion, though there are some beautiful examples of silk garments in the show. Extraordinarily, many scenes, traditional or otherwise, that were produced using this technique—warships plying the seas, planes with wings decorated in rising sun motifs flying past Mount Fuji and over maps of the empire—might never have been seen in public at the time, for tradition and scruples kept them confined, at least in the case of adult clothing, to *juban* and the interior linings of jackets. Ostentatious display was not the point. This is where one senses the degree to which the messages filtered through vast propaganda machines had infiltrated the most personal recesses of civilian life.

Among the most pervasive themes is that of modernization—and, perhaps ironically, Westernization—which was being promoted everywhere in Japanese culture in the 1920s and '30s. Catching up with the West in all matters—from militarization to empire-building to urban development—was of paramount importance to the Japanese, who wished to compete on the world front for wealth and resources. In one example of a silk *yuzen*-dyed *haura* (lining for a man's short jacket) from around 1930 we see a bustling city block, complete with automobile and streetcar traffic, high-rises with silhouetted figures at work and planes buzzing overhead. In a cunning device, stairs lead down from the open air into a subway tunnel, where passengers line up to board train cars with lit windows.

Such themes dovetailed with those that were more directly propagandistic, as in a man's *nagajuban* (a long undergarment worn beneath a kimono) from the early 1930s, in which Japanese aircraft, their wings emblazoned with the rising sun motif, fly toward a cityscape of towering skyscrapers. In hindsight, given the aerial bombardments of World War II, there is something ominous about the concatenation of elements; but, in fact, the message was intended as a positive one for forward-looking Japanese. Curving in a generous swath across the shoulders is a map of Japan's empire—Manchukuo (Manchuria, conquered in 1931 and renamed in 1932), Chosen (Korea, annexed in 1910) and various islands—the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," in the phrase devised by leaders who harbored ambitions beyond what they had already achieved.

Many of the kimonos in the exhibition were intended for men and boys, whose future sacrifices for the nation were encouraged, from the time they were, as infants, taken on their first visit to a family or local shrine in a special garment (*omiya-mairi*) decorated traditionally or with the more modern motifs. Among the examples here is one with vignettes of military equipment and another showing a scene of a tank and soldiers in battle, the latter with iconographic connections to a popular film poster. Boys and girls might also be ceremonially dressed for a festival called *Shichigosan*, or Seven-Five-Three Festival, the ages at which the children joined the celebration. One such kimono, probably for a boy, includes subjects discussed in science classes in the public education system: rak-



Girl's "Shichigosan" kimono, Japan, 1930s, printed synthetic silk, 46 by 43⅜ inches. Collection Nagata Ranko, Tokyo.

Garments from Japan were more luxurious than those from the West. Most date to the 1930s, when Japan was flush with imperial victories and sumptuary bans due to scarcity had not yet been imposed.

ing searchlight beams, aircraft, explosives and submarines, which are mixed with military and imperial flags in a dynamic allover composition. While a girl's kimono made for the same festival seems at first glance more benign, with its cheerful pink stripes, the cavorting children depicted convey a subtle message as they wave patriotic flags, a reference to a military victory. Still, for girls, martial trappings were less common.

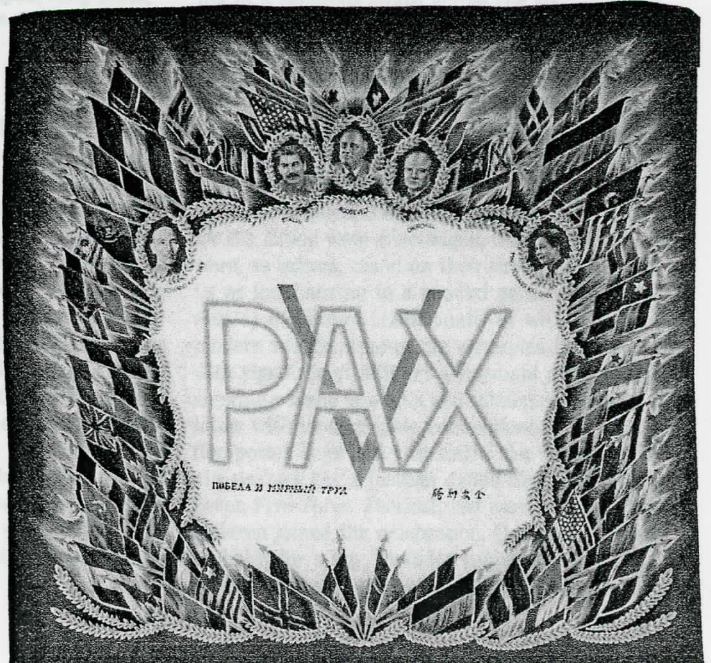
There are examples, as well, of Japanese women's garments, such as an obi with parachutes and gold thread, and summer kimonos colored in the traditional *kasuri* method, in which the dye is reserved from areas of the warp or weft. One example of the latter includes flags bearing, on the one hand, the rising sun, and on the other, swastikas, indicating the alliance, from 1936 on, between Japan and Nazi Germany. So subtle is the fabric, with the motifs tastefully materializing, as it were, within the overall gauzy effects of the dye, that we catch ourselves admiring its beauty before noticing its dark implications. Again, for women, the militaristic effects tended to be underplayed.

Slowly but surely, restrictions and then out-and-out bans were instituted on the production of luxury garments in Japan, after the U.S. entered the war and material hardship ensued. We don't see in the Western examples from the '40s anything like the luxury of what was produced in Japan, partly because, from the start of the fabrication of propaganda textiles in the West, scarcity measures were already in place, especially in Britain (less so in the U.S.). Firms such as Jacqmar, in Britain, and Echo, in the U.S., which specialized in the production of women's scarves, were inventive in a different way, including texts and often humorous motifs to convey messages urging conservation of resources and staying tight-lipped about war news. Scarves tend to be folksy, clearly less tied to long-standing craft traditions than were the Japanese war kimonos. Still, many of them are fresh and lively: for example, a scarf with a cigar-puffing Winston Churchill at the center backed by the British flag and surrounded by some of his pithier sayings. Certainly it is no surprise to find patriotism key in some of the American examples, such as one that contains the entire Pledge of Allegiance.

By the end of the war, victory textiles belong to the Allies, as in a scarf emblazoned with "PAX" and "V," surrounded by a veritable laurel wreath of flags and curious little reproductions of photos of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, as well as Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang Kai-shek. The Chinese cause had been championed in the U.S. even before Pearl Harbor, as news of Japanese atrocities in China like the Nanking Massacre (1937) reached these shores; the curators surmise that this scarf was U.S.-produced.

A project many years in the making for Atkins, the exhibition is accompanied by a massive catalogue with contributions from nine other essayists and a surfeit of information (though no index!). Do we really need to know about women workers on the British and American home fronts in such great depth, when all we're getting is their scarves and a dress or two? Is this not material we can find elsewhere? On the other hand, there are some truly fascinating and more apropos contributions, such as Kashiwagi Hiroshi's "Design and War: Kimono as 'Parlor-Performance' Propaganda," which contains many interesting details by a historian who lived through the events in question. This winter was a busy season in New York, with a number of blockbuster exhibitions drawing attention away from this fine effort. Fortunately, it will have another venue, traveling to the Allentown Art Museum this coming fall. □

"Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931-1945" was on view at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, New York [Nov 18, 2005-Feb. 12, 2006], which co-published the 376-page catalogue with Yale University Press. The show will appear at the Allentown [Pa.] Art Museum [Oct. 8, 2006-Jan. 7, 2007].



Woman's scarf, "PAX," possibly United States, 1945, printed rayon, 28⅞ by 29⅞ inches. Allentown Art Museum.