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Wearing Propaganda

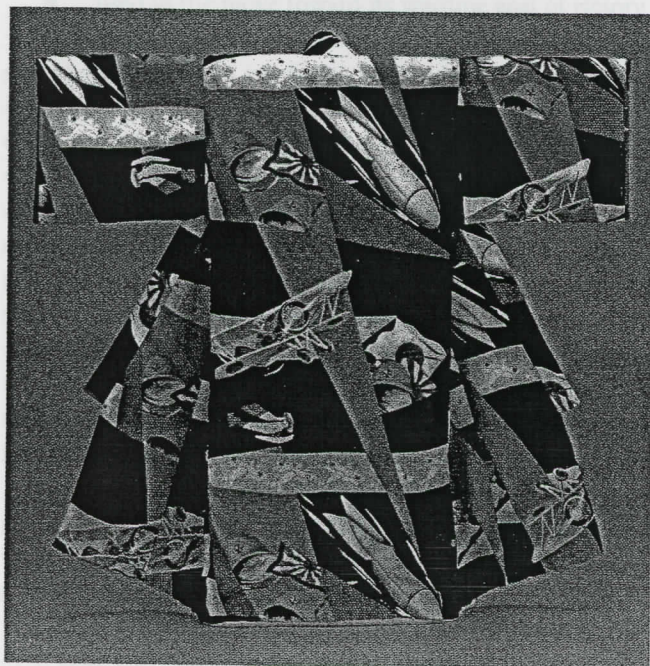
A new exhibition and accompanying book look at garments from the Asia-Pacific War and how they expressed wartime spirit and sacrifice.

by Jacqueline M. Atkins

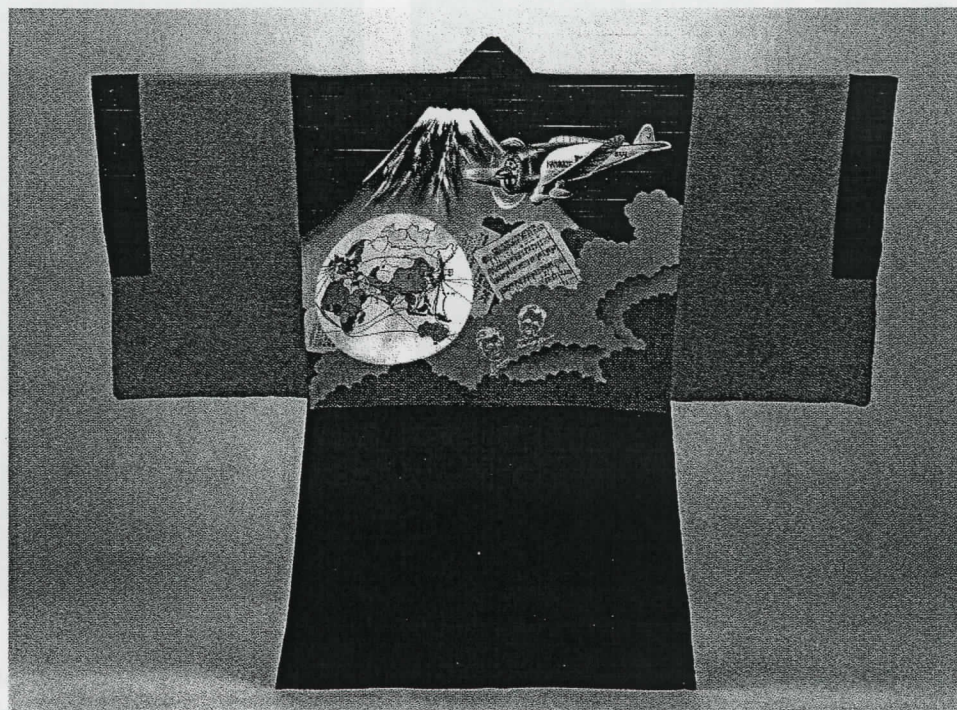
Ed.—On November 18, 2005, curator Jacqueline M. Atkins saw the culmination of several years' research and work with the opening of the exhibition *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931–1945*—the first major exhibition of propaganda fashion designed and produced in these countries during the years of conflict of the Asia-Pacific War (a period that includes the event better known in the West as World War II). On view through February 5 at New York City's Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, the exhibition coincides with the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

This is the first time that many of the 130 objects on view—which include clothing and accessories, textile samples, cartoons for textile designs, posters, and photographs—have been exhibited. The objects are drawn from public and private collections, including that of the Allentown Art Museum in Pennsylvania, where Atkins is now the Kate Fowler Merle-Smith Curator of Textiles. The themes and motifs of these textiles reiterated the military and political objectives of countries in a state of total war, she writes. “Their significance within the contemporary visual and popular culture of their time can be better understood when compared to the proliferation of patriotic images and sentiments (flags, police and fire department insignia, and the word “Remember”) on textiles and clothing in the United States, from T-shirts to tablecloths and tote bags to towels, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.”

Accompanying the exhibition is a catalog of the same name, published by the Bard Graduate Center in collaboration with Yale University Press. It includes images of the pieces in the exhibition and thirteen essays by Atkins and others. Here, reprinted with permission, is an abridged excerpt from one of Atkins's essays, “Propaganda on the Home Fronts: Clothing and Textiles as Message.”



TOP: Child's padded kimono, “Army Toys” pattern, Japan, early 1930s; printed silk lined with cotton and muslin; 25¼” x 26¾”. Collection of Sachiko Hirai. BOTTOM: Child's kimono, “Searchlight” pattern, Japan, late 1930s. Printed jinken (artificial silk); 31¼” x 29¼”. Collection of Yoku Tanaka. Photos: Tadaaki Nakagawa/ARTEC Studio.



Man's haori (jacket worn over kimono) with "Kamikaze" haura (lining), Japan, c. 1937. Haori: black silk; 51 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 37 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Haura: yūzen-dyed silk; 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Collection of Sachiko Hirai. Photo: Tadaaki Nakagawa/ARTEC Studio.

Total war engages every aspect of a nation's being, and all resources, however tangential they may seem, are used in the move toward its wartime goal of victory.

Thus, a myriad of media and modes of creative expression, both official and unofficial, are used to encourage individuals to recognize and play out their roles in the general crisis of wartime. The textiles of the Asia-Pacific War, with their wide range of graphically striking and effective propaganda designs, were among these tangential resources used in each country. Whether consumers bought the textiles for their message and fully recognized that they were wearing propaganda that reflected national ideology, or whether goods were bought more for their visual impact and perceived fashionability, is difficult to determine today, but it seems clear that a desire to make a patriotic statement, either publicly or to one's self, family, and other intimates, undoubtedly played a part.

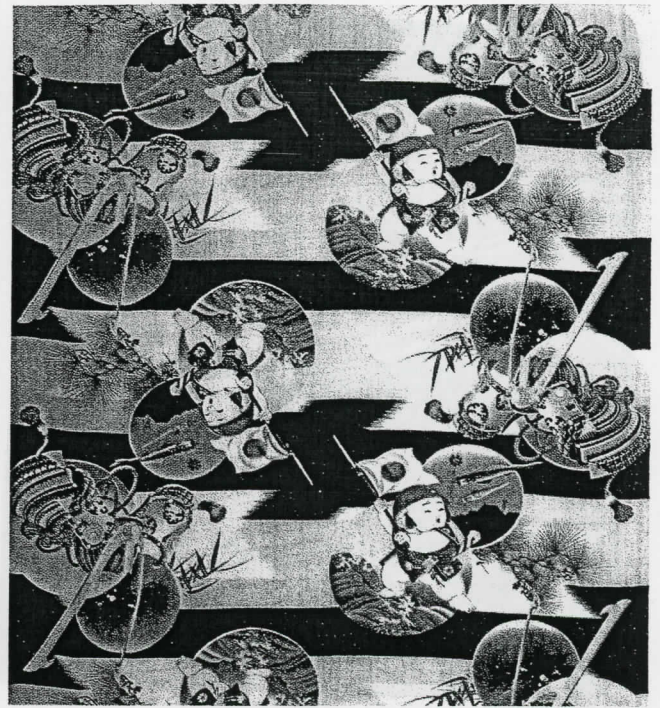
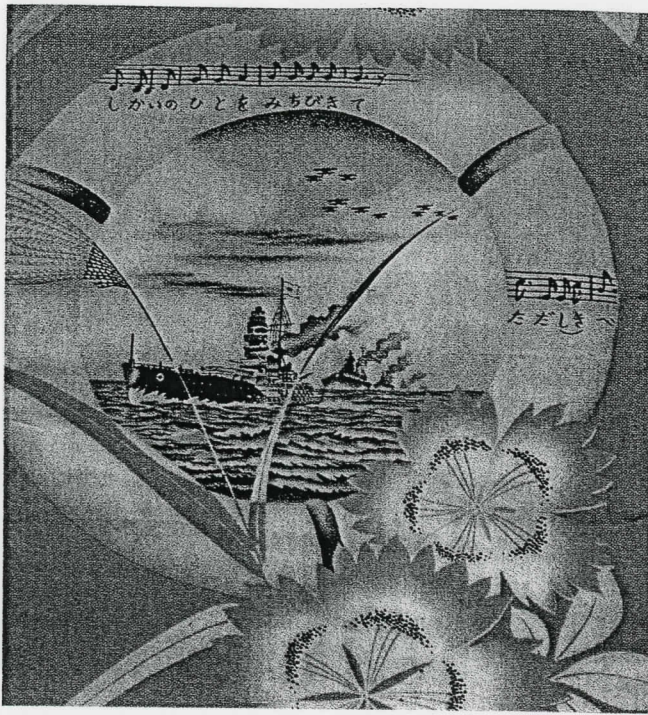
There is a significant difference in the audience for propaganda textiles in the two Western nations and in Japan. Women were the primary users in Britain and the United States, and men and boys formed the bulk of the market share in Japan.

In Japan propaganda textiles were worn by adults and children alike and used almost without exception in traditional clothing such as kimono, obi, *nagajuban* (under kimono), *haura* (the linings of *haori*, the jackets worn over kimono), and in useful accessories such as *han-eri* (a decorative neckcloth worn with kimono), *furoshiki* (carrying cloths), and *tenugui* (narrow multipurpose towels that could serve as headbands, washcloths, or kerchiefs, to note only a few of their uses).

In Japanese textiles with propaganda designs, the preponderance of the imagery would have been deemed masculine in the Japanese design lexicon and thus inappropriate for women or girls to wear. The design showing *koinobori*, the traditional carp banners flown for the Boys' Day holiday, for example (shown on next page), is composed of all masculine imagery. Koi (represented by the banners), *kabuto* (samurai helmets), and the militant doll figure (a traditional form) represent traditional masculine attributes of power, bravery, loyalty—all attributes that it is hoped the boy wearing such a textile will take on.

In general, adult outer kimono made from textiles with propaganda designs, whether for a male or a female, are comparatively rare. Rather, they appeared more often in garments such as *nagajuban* and *haura*, the first normally hidden by the outer kimono, the second seen only when the *haori* was removed. This concept was diametrically opposite to the wearing of propaganda textiles in Britain or the United States. Textiles in the West were intended to be visible to all, a public statement that set forth the political or ideological position of the wearer within the culture of the time.

It is important not to assume that the Japanese textiles are hidden from view because of a lack of a strong belief in what was being portrayed. Rather, their use has its roots deep in the textile history of the Tokugawa era (1621–1867) and the sumptuary laws governing the wearing of textiles. The laws were quite specific in delineating the types and quality of fabrics and the colors that could be worn by various classes of people, with



the most luxurious fabrics and richest colors assigned to the ruling class, and the less rich materials and colors to the lower classes (farmers, artisans, and tradesmen). Those in the lower classes with the means to purchase more elaborate textiles found ways to own and wear them without finding themselves at odds with the ruling class, however—they simply wore them under the prescribed clothing for their class. It was also not unusual for a wealthy merchant to commission a well-known artist to paint an elegant scene on the inner lining of a simple jacket, for his enjoyment and that of his intimates. Wearing of these hidden textile treasures receded somewhat in the late Tokugawa but did not disappear with the ending of the Tokugawa regime and the sumptuary laws in 1868. The dramatic designs of the *haura* and *nagajuban* of the 1930s and 1940s gave testimony to the continued importance of the decorative aspects of these garments and allowed wearers to savor at their leisure the “hidden” designs their garments carried.

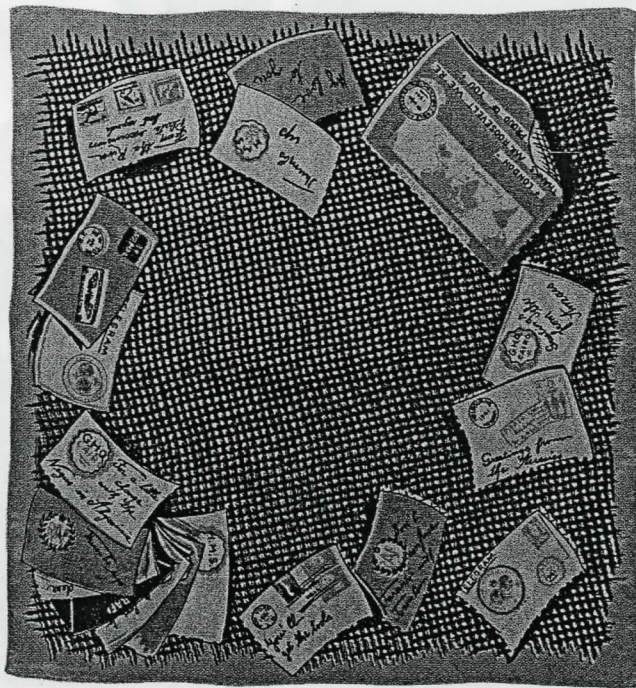
Images in the propaganda textiles meant for women’s and girls’ outer kimono and accessories were more likely to be opaque rather than transparent. When images are more overt, as in the obi with a battleship motif and a patriotic morale-boosting song on it above, they are softened by the use of pastel colors and flowers associated with women, such as wild carnations, which have a very feminine connotation. Cherry blossoms, though a symbol of femininity in many contexts and time periods, became a metaphor for sacrifice (dying for emperor and country) in the wartime years and were not seen in the propaganda designs produced for women’s kimono. When used in its metaphorical incarnation of sacrifice and militarism, the cherry blossom required other wartime motifs such as airplanes, battleships, or guns also to be present to substantiate

LEFT: *Obi* with “Patriotic March” music, Japan; late 1930s; printed artificial silk; 12” x 9’. Private collection. RIGHT: *Kimono* or *nagajuban* (under kimono) fabric (detail), “Boys’ Day” pattern, Japan, 1930s; printed wool muslin; 28” x 30’. Private collection. Photos: Bruce White.

the meaning, and women would be unlikely to wear such overt symbolism. More common in women’s clothing was more subtle imagery, such as an elegant summer kimono with airplane motifs, where the design may be taken as relating to modernity or to the increasing military importance of air power. Women did, however, use *nagajuban* with strong propaganda designs, and it seemed that allowances could be made for women to wear more masculine imagery in undergarments if not in outerwear.

Japanese children’s clothing had fewer constraints than that for adults, and the propaganda textiles were extensively used for outer kimono for young boys. Western dress was accepted apparel for urban Japanese school-age boys at this time, so the propaganda textiles were used primarily for traditional clothing worn by babies, toddlers, and pre-school or elementary school-age children. Older boys might wear kimono and *haori* for special occasions. Designs incorporating wartime motifs were popular in boys’ ceremonial and festival clothing.

Most British and American propaganda textiles were made into dress goods or women’s accessories, such as handkerchiefs and scarves, of which the latter were wildly popular during the war years. Scarves were versatile; as an article in a 1945 issue of *Harper’s* noted, “used with ingenuity and imagination,” scarves could “enrich . . . scanty wardrobes and bring individuality to uniform clothes.” They were also eminently practical, providing a fashionable yet sensible way to protect hair from



LEFT: Scarf, produced by Jacqmar, 1940s; printed silk (plain weave); 26" x 24". RIGHT: Woman's scarf, produced by Filmyra, early 1940s; printed rayon; 35" x 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Both scarves, collection of Allentown Art Museum (gift of Kate Fowler Merle-Smith). Photos: Robert Walch.

dirt and danger in factory situations, where many women found themselves working as replacements for men conscripted by the military. Scarves were seen everywhere and used by everyone, and Jacqmar, Ascher, and Filmyra in Britain and Echo in the United States produced propaganda designs specifically for headscarves.

Some textiles were designed in a format specifically meant to be used for scarves. Fabrics were printed with a design complete with borders that could be cut apart at intervals and hemmed to produce squares roughly 26 by 26 inches or 36 by 36 inches. Others were designed as yardage for women's dresses, although some of these fabrics were turned into scarves as well, not only by purchasers but also by manufacturers, who found the scarves to be good marketing devices. Many of the designs for dress fabrics featured small prints with frequent repeats so that matching the design was less of an issue and wastage could be avoided when cutting the fabric for a dress pattern—a concern for many in a time of rationing.

In sharp contrast to Japan, propaganda designs in Britain and the United States appeared to a limited extent in fabrics intended for children (usually boys), for example, soldier images on pajamas and handkerchiefs, or warships and planes on bedspreads. For dressier occasions, boys could be dressed in quasi-military outfits; miniature nurses' and women's service uniforms were produced for little girls. They also, like their mothers, had a choice of wearing dresses, blouses, coats, and

jackets with military-like embellishments.

Although only a small number of British and American propaganda textiles were specifically intended for children's use, examples for men are even fewer. Ties would seem to have been a logical place for men to express their patriotic sentiments, but this does not seem to have been the case. A variety of lively and unusual designs can be found on the ties of the 1940s, but few propaganda images are among them. Perhaps one explanation lies in the fact that so many men in the wartime years were either in the military—and therefore in uniform, which allowed a clothing statement in and of itself—or in war-related jobs. Many of these jobs were in factories, which demanded their own sort of uniforms. Men not in overt "uniform" perhaps did not want to call attention to the fact by flaunting conspicuous propaganda imagery but showed their patriotism in less obvious ways, such as through use of handkerchiefs with wartime themes and motifs that could be purchased at five-and-ten-cent stores for very little money and so were affordable by a large part of the population. Tie and lapel pins representing American flags or V for Victory were also popular. ●

The *Wearing Propaganda* catalog is available through major booksellers or from Yale University Press: www.yale.edu/yup or (800) 987-7323.

Jacqueline M. Atkins is the Kate Fowler Merle-Smith Curator of Textiles at Allentown Art Museum and a PhD candidate at the Bard Graduate Center. She has published extensively on the history of American and Japanese domestic textiles and quilts and on American folk art.