

Shōchikubai on the Coromandel

Textiles, techniques and trends in transit

Ariane Fennetaux

The terms used in Europe for this type of garment – ‘Cambay’ or *Japonsche Rock* in Dutch, ‘India Gown’ or ‘Banyan’ in English, or ‘Indienne’ and ‘robe d’Arménien’ in French – reflect the trade networks from which the style resulted. As a garment type, the European night gown neatly encapsulates the complex, multi-polar networks of exchange and influence that were characteristic of the ‘interwoven globe’ in the early modern period.²

Whereas at first sight the Fries Museum night gown seems to result from a neat pattern of circulation between three distinct geographical areas – Europe, India, and Japan – linked together by the arrival in Asia of European trading companies, close study of the garment shows various and pre-existing multi-layered patterns of appropriation.

Kimono first arrived in Europe as gifts from the shōgun and various officials to the Dutch factors when they were allowed, once a year, to go to Edo and ask for trading rights to be renewed. However, the gown in the Fries Museum is not a Japanese garment, not even one altered to suit European tastes. The back of the garment is made in one piece, a detail that is characteristically not Japanese. Crucial to the symbolics of the kimono is the central back seam (背縫い or *senui*), which was thought to offer protection to a vulnerable part of the body. Even when the fabric was wide enough to be used uncut at the back – for instance, when made out of Indian cotton which could come in larger widths than the traditional silks – a pleat would still be made in the middle to replicate the traditional back seam.

Most strikingly, the gown was not made from yards of painted cotton cut and assembled into a garment. The motif was applied to shape or ‘à disposition,’ something we can infer from the decorative borders of the garment and from the upward direction of the pattern on both front and back, even though the front and the back were made from one piece of fabric without a shoulder seam. This means that the garment was made from fabric that received its motif specifically to be made into this type of dress.

Closer scrutiny of some of the seams also shows that the pattern was painted onto the garment after assembly. The stitches used to assemble the garment reveal that the thread used took on the red dye (probably chay root), while the inside of the seams remained uncoloured, which shows that the seam existed when the partly assembled garment received its colour. This technique of applying decoration post-assembly is visible in other chintz night gowns made on the Coromandel coast and may have been a widespread practice. The many references to ready-made night gowns in European capitals such as Amsterdam have usually been interpreted as an early sign of the advent of ready-made production in the West. Our evidence suggests that India produced ready-made or partly ready-made gowns for export from the end of the 17th century.³

A later gown is an example of a partly ready-made kit. Its sides remain unsewn and its sleeves detached, ready to be assembled.⁴ A comment in the VOC-archives shows that Japanese-looking gowns such as the example in the Fries Museum could be produced in bulk for the European market. When the Dutch commissioner General Van Rheede visited the Coromandel coast in 1689, he sent six chintz gowns “in the Japanese style” from the Coromandel to the Netherlands, noting that he could have a thousand made the following year.⁵ Although we cannot be sure they are related to the note, there are actually four surviving shōchikubai chintz gowns.⁶

The Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, holds a late 17th-century chintz night gown [fig. 1].¹ The gown uses distinctive Indian technologies of mordanted fast-colour painting and dyeing, and features the traditional Japanese motif of pine, plum blossom, and bamboo, known as *shōchikubai* [松竹梅]. While its design is apparently inspired by the Japanese kimono, detailed analysis shows that this garment was made for European rather than Japanese consumption. With a palampore-style tree on the back, a vibrant red *shōchikubai* motif, and a front that bears some resemblance with Japanese kimono, the gown is a culturally hybrid garment.



Fig. 1: Man's night gown with *shōchikubai* motif, India c. 1700, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, inv. : T.2016-038. © with kind permission from the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden.

If we are to believe European observers, Indian calico artisans were working from musters “lying at their sides” which they “imitate [...] so that it has a complete likeness.”⁷ We know models were sent from Europe for copying and that artists were delegated to India by the VOC to create textile designs.⁸ Several European prints have been suggested as possible sources for the *shōchikubai* chintz gowns. However, if we observe how the painted motifs imitate the traditional tie-and-dye technique of *kanoko shibori* (鹿の子絞), it seems more likely that Indian artisans had direct access to actual Japanese textiles. This technique, which creates small diaper patterns and was sometimes used to represent pine boughs on Edo-period kimono, is indigenous to Japan and specific to textile.

Moreover, the Fries Museum gown does not include bamboo. The painted flowers, which are depicted on leaf-bearing branches and with slighted indented petals, also resemble cherry rather than the plum blossoms associated with *shōchikubai*. Clearly, if the Japanese motif was copied, it was not done in any slavish way, but was substantially adapted by the Indian artisans who used their own technical and aesthetic vocabulary. Another aesthetic influence may be seen in the pine at the back. It grows from a mound that closely echoes the stylised rockery used on Indian palampores, which, as we know, were themselves a cross-cultural design bringing together Europe, India, and China.⁹

In the 16th century, the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605) actively encouraged Turkish, European, Armenian, and Persian migrants to settle in India and become involved in textile production. Early modern India was awash with a variety of technical

and aesthetic influences, through the movement of goods and people across the country. The Persian influence in particular is ever-present in the world of Indian cotton, as evidenced by textile terminology, where Persian terms abound, starting with the word *kalam*, the name given to the distinctive pen used to paint on cotton. And if the kimono is often cited as the origin of the fashion for loose night gowns in Europe, the influence of the caftan or the Arab and Persian *qaba* is also essential. Both were worn across the Middle East and beyond, sometimes by diasporic populations present in India and actively involved in trade, long before Europe's involvement in Eurasian or inter-Asian mercantile contacts.¹⁰ The gown in the Fries Museum may have been made for European consumption, but it was the result of combined influences, many of which long predated the VOC or other East India Companies.

To conclude, let us return to the Japanese element of this story. Contrary to what Eurocentric discussions of fashion history suggest, the kimono was not an unchanging garment emblematic of a ‘fashionless’ society.¹¹ Japan was a highly fashion-conscious country. Decades before Europe had a fashion press, dozens of pattern books were published in Japan showing subtle variations in patterns and taste. Towards the end of the 17th century, for instance, the panels forming the collar and wrap over front (*okumi* and *eri*) which also created the distinctive indented line of the front had changed shape and proportion, becoming much shorter and narrower. With the square indentation of its front almost at hem level, the Fries Museum gown thus seems to have been modelled after a garment that, by that time, was distinctively old-fashioned in Japan itself. The Japanese might have been

getting rid of undesirable old stock when they gifted kimono to Europeans – who probably knew no better.

This further reverses the vision of Europeans single-handedly orchestrating global material circulations. Not only do the resulting gowns testify to much more complex trade networks and a longer chronology than that defined by Europe's involvement in Asian trade, but they also illustrate Europeans' relative subsidiary position in Asia – in India as much as in Japan.

Ariane Fennetaux is Associate Professor at Université de Paris. Her research focuses on material culture with a particular emphasis on textiles and dress. She co-edited *The Afterlife of Used Things. Recycling in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Routledge 2014) and, together with Barbara Burman, is the author of *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives 1690-1900* (Yale UP, 2019).

Notes

- 1 Leeuwarden, Fries Museum, inv. : T.2016-038. A much longer version of this paper is to be published as Ariane Fennetaux, ‘Behind the Seams. Global Circulations in a Group of Japanese-Inspired Cotton Nightgowns c. 1700’, *Textile History*, forthcoming 2021. I would like to thank Gieneke Arnoli and Eveline Holsappel, curators at the Fries Museum for their kind help and support.
- 2 The phrase is borrowed from Amanda Peck, *Interwoven Globe. The Worldwide Textile Trade 1500-1800* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).
- 3 Ariane Fennetaux, ‘“Indian Gowns Small and Great”: Chintz Banyans Ready Made in the Coromandel 1680-1780’, *Costume* 55, no. 1 (2021): 49-73.
- 4 Peabody Essex Museum, PEM, inv. no. 2012.22-21abc.
- 5 Cited in Marghareta Breukink-Peeze, ‘Japanese Robes, a Craze’, in *Imitation and Inspiration: Japanese Influence on Dutch Art*, ed. Stefan van Raay (Amsterdam: Art Unlimited Books, 1989), 56.
- 6 The other three are in Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, inv. 959.12; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. BK-1980-99 and Palais Galliera Paris, inv. 1920.1.2039.
- 7 Daniel Havart, *Op- en Ondergang van Cormandel, of Cormandel in Zijn Binnenste Geheel Open Gestelt* (Amsterdam: Jan ten Hoorn, 1689), vol. 3, p.13. Cited in John Irwin, ‘Origins of the “Oriental Style” in English Decorative Art’, *Burlington Magazine* 97, 625 (1955), p. 110.
- 8 On artists being sent to India by the VOC see Heleen B. van der Weel, ‘In Die Kunst En Wetenschap Gebruickt’. *Gerrit Claeszoon Clink (1646-1693), Meester Kunstschilder van Delft En Koopman in Dienst van de Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2002).
- 9 Katherine B. Brett, ‘The Flowering Tree in Indian Chintz’, *Journal of Indian Textile History* 3 (1957), pp. 45-57.
- 10 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System AD 1250-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 13.
- 11 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme XVe-XVIIIe siècle: Les Structures du quotidien* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1967), pp. 271-72.