The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has one of the most significant collections of Japanese textiles and dress in Europe. One recent acquisition is an Edo-period (1615-1868) outer kimono (uchikake) [Fig. 1]. What makes the garment so unusual is that it is made from silk brocaded woven in Lyon in the mid-18th century. Such fabric was typically used to make suits for stylish and wealthy European men. Instead, this silk found its way to Japan, where it was made into a kimono for a high-ranking woman from Japan’s ruling military (samurai) class.

Just as the Dutch gifted cloth, they were presented with kimonos. Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1755), doctor at the VOC base in Dejima from 1690-1692, recorded the garments that the Dutch received when they travelled to Edo. On his second visit to the capital, Kaempfer reported that “on the 25th of April, we had 10 fine gowns sent to us by Binga, 5 as good as any with flowers, by the young Prince of Frona [Hidragi], ... and a couple of sorry ones by the second Governor of Jedo.” Whether with the gowns given by the shogun, Kaempfer noted that a total of 123 garments were received on this occasion. The Dutch shipped the kimono they received to the VOC headquarters in Batavia and there to London, where they fetched high prices at the East India Company’s auctions.

A tale of two silks

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The Focus

Lyon was the main centre for silk weaving in France, and, and here Europe’s most fashionable fabrics were designed and manufactured. The marketing and distribution of Lyonaisse silk was carried out by commissioners who would travel widely through Europe, carrying samples in bales which to demonstrate both the high quality and the innovative designs of the forthcoming seasonal collections. As socially adept as they were commercially skilled, these dedicated salesmen would cultivate a rich clientele in major cities such as Amsterdam. It was presumably here that an order was placed for a roll of silk with a small-scale pattern in blue, pink, yellow, and black on a white ground, perhaps by a leading member of the Dutch East India Company (Wonenidige Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) [Fig. 2]. Whether the silk was originally purchased to tailor domestic garments or specifically to take to Asia is not known, but such an expensive item would certainly not have been left unused. So, soon after its creation in Lyon, it was placed on a VOC ship bound for Japan.

The VOC had restricted foreign trade and relations during most of the Edo period. The Dutch were, however, permitted to maintain a trading base on Dejima, a small artificial island in Nagasaki harbour. Their movements and activities were heavily constrained, but the Dutch were accorded the honour of regular audiences with the shogun. Once a year, the VOC chief, secretary, and physician would make the long journey to Edo to pay their respects, present gifts, and give thanks for the continuation of trade. Cloth was an important commercial commodity as well as an important article of diplomatic exchange, and there was then a major shift to cottons from South and Southeast Asia. The latter became highly fashionable and there are a number of extant kimonos made from imported cotton. The V&A’s uchikake is, as yet, the only known Edo-period garment to be made from European silk. Given its high quality, the fabric was certainly a diplomatic gift.

Testimony from the private collector who donated the kimono to the museum revealed that the garment had probably belonged to the wife of the Nabeshima daimyō, who ruled the Saga domain in south-east Japan. The domain was largely responsible for the military defence of nearby Nagasaki. It also had strong links with Dutch trade: the export porcelain centre of Arita and the port of Imari, from which the Japanese were shipped, were both located in Saga. The Dutch party also passed through Hizen, the castle town, on their journey to Edo. It is not known whether the French fabric was a gift that resulted from this close connection or whether it came to Nabeshima via the shogun, nor indeed when it was made into a garment. What is clear is that wearing a kimono of such rare and exotic cloth would have been an indicator of both status and style.

The uchikake was featured in the V&A exhibition Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk, staged in 2020, in the section that explored the sartorial interaction between Japan and Europe in the Edo period [Fig. 3]. Also displayed was a recently discovered robe of Japanese indigo-dyed plain weave silk (habutae) worn in Britain in the early 18th century [Fig. 4].