



1 Boy's *miyamairi* kimono depicting leaping carp. Japan, early to mid-Meiji period (1868–1912). Silk plain weave with *yuzen*-dyeing, *bokashi* (shading) painting, metallic and silk embroidery highlights. The small black spots in the ocean are tiny sections of metallic embroidery. 84 × 101.5 cm (33" × 40"). Author's collection

2 Studio image of a grandmother holding her grandson on the day of *Hatsu Miyamairi* ('first shrine visit'). Japan, ca. 1940s, A samurai-themed *miyamairi* kimono is draped over the baby, with the long kimono sashes tied securely around the grandmother's neck. Courtesy Vintage Japan-esque on Flickr

# Sophistication at the start of life

Miyamairi kimonos mark a Japanese child's rites of passage. Using examples from his own collection, collector, dealer and researcher Roger Yorke looks in particular at the meanings and symbolism of those made especially for boys.



*tsutsugaki* (a type of resist painting) and hand painting, or hand painting alone.

The tradition probably arose as a response to the high infant mortality rate that once plagued Japan. General customs based on special children kimonos can be traced back as far as the 9th century, when Heian period aristocrats would celebrate the safe passage of their children through their early years. In centuries past, many Japanese children did not live to see their first birthdays, an obstacle in a culture in which prosperity was believed to result from a long bloodline and having many children. In response, the Japanese enacted lavish rituals at auspicious times during childhood to assure the child's good fortune and longevity.

In traditional Japan, a newborn baby was considered impure and unpredictable, and was wrapped in rags fashioned out of the mother's old clothing. On the seventh day, the child would be given a proper name along with its first kimono, to ensure his or her entry into the world. Then, when a boy was thirty-one days old, the specialised *miyamairi* kimono was used for the first time - draped over the infant during the *Hatsu Miyamairi* ('first shrine visit') ceremony. The baby boy was draped or wrapped in this way because he was still too small to wear the normal kimono. The *Hatsu Miyamairi* is just the first occasion in a boy's life when the *miyamairi* kimono is used.

Traditionally, the *miyamairi* kimono was commissioned and bought at substantial cost by the father's parents, and then presented to their grandchild and his parents. The *Hatsu Miyamairi* ceremony is attended by both parents, together with grandparents as well as other family and close friends. The *hanji*

<sup>2</sup> The Japanese view their ceremonial kimonos as works of art, like paintings. *Miyamairi* kimonos are one-of-a-kind ceremonial robes created for an infant's life-milestone visits to a Shinto shrine. While practical as a garment, they are evocative and remarkable textiles that have been largely ignored as an art form by both collectors and the research community. Although both girls and boys wore *miyamairi* kimonos, this article concerns itself with boys' *miyamairi*, as these are perhaps more interesting in terms of layout and motifs.

These *miyamairi* ('shrine visit') ceremonial kimonos are extraordinary for both their sophistication and their deep symbolic meaning. In shape they resemble formal adult kimonos and feature family crests and pictorial designs created through a combination of



3 Boy's *miyamairi* kimono (and detail) depicting the folk tale of the strong and brave Kintaro refereeing a wrestling match between a rabbit and a monkey. Japan, Meiji period, perhaps ca. 1890–92. Silk plain weave with hand-painted pigments. 86 × 20 cm (34" × 38"). Author's collection

### *Aristocrats would celebrate the safe passage of their children through their early years*

character representing 'big' is written with red ink on the boy's forehead in the hope of his growing up big and strong.

During the *Hatsu Miyamairi* ceremony, the father's mother holds the child in her arms with the presentation kimono draped over the tiny month-old baby, the kimono ties secured around her own neck and shoulders (2). The duty of the paternal grandmother in carrying the child is to assist the recovering (from giving birth) mother; in addition, this task symbolises the baby's entrance and acceptance into the husband's family.

Swinging a *tamagushi* (a decorated sakaki-tree branch) right and left, a *kan-nushi* (Shinto priest) in full traditional costume and headgear officiates at the proceedings, praying for the baby's happiness and health, and asking the *Usubana Gami* (local deity) to bless and purify the baby. The *kan-nushi* would recite a prayer that mentioned the baby's name, names of the parents, the family address and the date of baby's birth. The ceremony establishes the child as one of the shrine parishioners.

At the end of the ceremony, the parents and grandparents come forward one by one, bowing to the altar, and placing *tamagushis* upon it. At the end of the ceremony, the baby's grandparents would typically host a party for friends and family, and the *miyamairi* kimono would be carefully put away until the next formal temple visit, the *shichigosan* for a three-year-old.

The *miyamairi* kimono would be worn again by a Japanese boy during the Shinto *shichi-go-san* ('seven-five-three') rite of passage ceremony, which is repeated at the age of five. By this time, these three- and five-year-old boys are big enough to wear their *miyamairi* kimono, albeit with the waist and shoulder sections temporarily folded and hand-sewn to reduce the height and width of the kimono.

*Shichigosan* is celebrated on the 15th November because this is the festival day for a Shinto guardian spirit. It is a day on which the Japanese celebrate the lunar-calendar autumn harvest, and considered the luckiest day of the year. For Japanese boys, their three-year-old

*Shichigosan* was a day to celebrate the *kamioki* ('hair leaving') event, meaning that he could start to let his hair grow. Until this event, a boy's head was kept clean-shaven, as it was believed that during their first three years of life, children caught diseases and bad energy from their hair. Additionally, at the *Shichigosan* ceremony, parents asked the priest at a nearby Shinto shrine to perform an *oharai* purification rite on their three-year old boy, and recite a *norito* Shinto prayer for their children's continued health.

Again in November, a five-year-old boy will attend his last *Shichigosan* ceremony (8). Shinto prayers for continued good luck and long life are incanted, with the main celebration being *hakamagi-no-gi*, where the boy dons his first *hakama* (loose-pleated trousers used for formal wear). This five-year-old is now considered a little man for the first time, and correspondingly assumes new and more mature roles and responsibilities.

It was only after the beginning of the 19th century that the designs adorning boys and girl's kimonos began to differ; this divergence became more pronounced during the Meiji period (1868–1912), which ushered in a wholesale change in the social hierarchy, including the adoption of the *miyamairi* kimono tradition by all Japanese citizens who could afford the great expense involved.

Boys' *miyamairi* dating to the Meiji, Taisho (1912–26) and Showa (1926–1989) periods have various set characteristics. They share the same structural features of all kimonos: a T-shaped, straight-lined robe worn so that the hem falls to the ankle, with attached collar and long, wide sleeves. Unlike the larger adult kimonos that are constructed of two joined strips of fabric to form the rear, the *miyamairi* is called *hitotsumi*, referring to its back's single fabric width. Shoulder widths average 33 inches (84 cm), with garment heights ranging from 37 to 44 inches (94–112 cm). Two simple silk sashes attached to each of the front lapels can be utilised to tie the kimono front shut, or tied around the grandmother's neck during the first shrine visit.

Unlike the crepe and damask silks of adult kimonos, boys *miyamairi* kimonos had to be a more reflective plain weave, called *habutae*, of the finest silk. Decorations were executed in either *tsutsugaki yuzen* (rice paste resist painting) or *tegaki-yuzen* (freehand painting). *Miyamairi* kimonos are typically dominated by a centred design stretching from sleeve to



4 Boy's *miyamairi* kimono depicting the samurai Kashiwade no Hanoshi fighting a tiger. Japan, Meiji period (1868–1912). Silk plain weave with *yuzen*-dyeing and hand-painted pigments. 84 × 101.5 cm (33" × 40"). Author's collection

sleeve. These kimonos always sport five white *mon* (family crests) from the father's family, three on the upper back, and two on each of the front shoulders, so they are the most formal of garments. Traditionally, most *miyamairi* have a black background, and rarely blue or dark brown, although in recent times several other colours have gained acceptance.

Although *miyamairi* kimonos were created in specialised workshops, the boy's mother would often later add some protective stitching to her son's kimono. The Japanese believed that stitching prevented the entrance of evil spirits through a kimono. As *miyamairi* kimonos are *hitotsumi* (single cloth width) with no back centre seam, these kimonos were deemed under-protected from harmful spirits. The decorative stitching the mother worked into *miyamairi* kimonos is referred to as *semamori* ('back magic' or 'to protect the back'). Some Meiji and Taisho period *miyamairi* kimonos





5 Boy's *miyamairi* kimono depicting family crests (front detail) and a Noh theatre actor (back). Japan, Meiji period (1868-1912). Silk plain weave with *yuzen*-dyeing and hand-painted pigments. 84 × 94 cm (33" × 37"). Author's collection

6 Boy's *miyamairi* kimono depicting a three-clawed dragon holding a jewel. Japan, Meiji period (1868-1912). Extremely fine silk plain weave with *yuzen*-dyeing and hand-painted pigments. 89 × 94 cm (35" × 37"). Author's collection

*Finely rendered auspicious motifs represent good luck, prosperity and longevity for the child*

display back stitching at an angle to the left side of the centre line, although from the Meiji period onwards practically all *miyamairi* kimonos display geometric (or in rare cases non-geometric) talismanic *semamori* stitching where the left strap is attached to the front lapel.

Boys' *miyamairi* kimono were normally decorated with symbols of strength, honour, knowledge, culture and perseverance—such as predatory animals and samurai warriors—or items with martial connotations, such as war toys, arrows, war helmets, and swords. These motifs were representative of the hopes and desires of the boy's parents and grandparents.

One popular theme for these kimonos is that of carp in raging waters, as Japanese parents want their boys to have the strength, resilience and courage of the wild carp battling turbulent waters. This motif is associated with

the virtues of the determined warrior, and in modern times it has been a metaphor for the qualities one seeks in a young male. One exceptional example (1) depicts three carp, with the one in the foreground leaping completely free of the frothy waters below.

Although this theme is common, this particular example is the best that I have seen—the artistry is superb, with dynamic, blue-shaded frothy waves, and refined *yuzen*-painted carp, also finely shaded and capped off with wonderful silk and metallic embroidery highlights. The scene continuation from the main body section to that on the sleeves, although always present in *miyamairi*, is particularly seamless in this example, allowing the kimono 'canvas' to reach its fullest potential.

Some *miyamairi* kimonos depict passed-down folk tales, such as that of the strong and







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7 Boy's *miyamairi* kimono (and detail), depicting a legendary treasure ship or *takarabune*. Japan, Meiji period (1868-1912). Silk plain weave with *yuzen*-dyeing and embroidery highlights. 99 × 107 cm (39" × 42"). Author's collection

brave Kintaro (3). Legend has it that Kintaro was a baby abandoned by his parents at birth near Mount Fuji. He was raised by Yamauba, half-woman, half-spirit who lived in the nearby Ashigara Mountains. He grew up with animals as friends. One day he refereed a series of wrestling matches between pairs of some of these friends, including a contest between a rabbit and a monkey.

The first artistic depiction of this legendary match can be found on an 1830 Kuniyoshi woodblock print. However, the central theme of this particular kimono artwork is directly inspired by a small woodblock print of October 1890 by Tsukioka Yoshotoshi, *Moon of Kintoki's Mountain*. Yoshotoshi, a late 19th-century Japanese printmaker, was famous for his woodblock series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*. Although the depictions of Kintaro and the rabbit are virtually identical on the kimono and the Yoshotoshi print, the monkey's face differs on the kimono, where it more resembles a rat or other animal. Furthermore, unlike the print, the scene on the kimono is set within a forest. It is possible that Yoshotoshi had a hand in creating the design for this kimono, as the forest scenery and wrestling match imagery seem so complementary and reflective of his



artistic sensibility. He passed away in 1892, so if he was involved in designing this kimono, it would logically have been during the 1890-92 time period.

Samurai warriors were another popular theme in *miyamairi* kimonos. One example features the rare theme of the brave, fully dressed samurai Kashiwade no Hanoshi fighting a tiger (4). Kashiwade no Hanoshi was a 6th-century Japanese warrior who was sent to Korea as an envoy. Legend has it that, once he was there, a tiger devoured his daughter, necessitating a confrontation with the offending tiger in a bamboo grove. After a fierce fight involving both bravery and honour, the samurai is victorious. During the period 1830 to 1850 this legend was depicted on several woodblock prints, including one by the great artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi.

Some *miyamairi* kimonos were created with unique themes. On one remarkable example (5) the front is unusual, decorated with many family crest motifs, while its back is even more striking, completely dominated by the image of a Noh actor performing in the auspicious *Sambaso*.

The *Sambaso* is a traditional sacred dance performed as a prelude to certain Noh thraatre



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8 A five-year-old boy wearing his *miyamairi* kimono and *hakama* (pleated trousers). In recent decades the background colours of *miyamairi* kimonos have often diverged from the traditional black. Kyoto, Japan, November 2008. Image courtesy Jeffrey Friedl.

Photo: © Jeffrey Friedl

plays, celebrating fertility and good harvests, with the additional intent to avert earthquakes and appease the gods. In the case of this kimono, the Noh actor is carrying a fan which displays finely rendered auspicious motifs representing good luck, prosperity and longevity for the child for whom the kimono was created.

The family crest motifs on the front of this kimono include the small formal *mon* for bamboo, which signifies constancy and integrity, which was a popular family crest with warrior families. The enlarged crests include: one representing mist, a motif popular on scrolls but not textiles; cloves, signifying health, comfort and luxury; the 'triple pestle', representing a tool utilised in the making of rice cakes served on festive occasions and thus regarded as a felicitous motif; an umbrella to show the status of the nobility; single and triple horizontal stripes which have strong martial connotations; *tomoe*, a comma-like symbol representing Hachimon, the god of war, possessing both religious and martial qualities; a turnip, having quasi-magical qualities; a star to represent the protective war deity Myoken; and 'crossed sickles', signifying cutting down one's enemies. The use of this type of motif on a child's kimono may suggest that the owners were members of a wealthy military family.

The three-clawed dragon depicted on another kimono (6) holds a tide-compelling jewel in its right claw. Because a dragon can live in both air and water, it is believed to offer protection from fire. Edo-era firemen often tattooed themselves with dragons or wore padded jackets with dragons embroidered in the linings next to their skin for protection.

At the autumn equinox, the dragon descends into the sea with the tide-compelling jewel of ebb and flood. Dragons may be depicted in pursuit of this jewel, fighting for its possession, or grasping it with their claws. This mystical jewel or *tama* was adopted by the Buddhist religion and came to symbolise omnipotence through asceticism. It is also said to have the power to grant all wishes. The jewel, which at first is flaming, then liquefies and crystallises into a beautiful luminous sphere, symbol of the origin of our planet, Earth.

It is this crystallised and finalised golden yellow jewel that is depicted on this kimono. In Japanese art the dragon is never totally visible. It is partly hidden by swirling clouds or

storm waves because its form is so terrifying that 'no mortal may look upon its entire body and live'.

Also popular are kimonos sporting the theme of a legendary treasure ship or *takarabune*. The large example illustrated here (7) features one such *takarabune* overflowing with special cargo, which comprises treasures associated with the seven gods of good fortune, including the key to the gods' storehouse, the god Daikoku's hammer, bales of hay, sacred jewels on the sail, an inexhaustible money bag, and a hat that makes the wearer invisible.

According to legend, the *takarabune* sails into port on New Year's Eve to dispense gifts of happiness and luck to believers. On that day children receive red envelopes emblazoned with the *takarabune* and containing money, and many people sleep with a depiction of the seven gods and the *takarabune* under their pillow at New Year to ensure prosperity and good dreams for the coming months. If the bearer has nightmares, the picture should be set adrift in the river or sea to neutralise the bad luck.

The *takarabune* is always depicted in full sail, laden with food and treasures, and prints of it usually include an auspicious palindromic poem: 'During the endless night, half sleeping, half waking, I hear sounds of a ship sailing over the wave crests—oh, I know it is bringing good fortune!'

Although not illustrated here, solitary hawks are another popular kimono theme. One artistic and refined example in my collection features a large, intricately *yuzen*-dyed hawk on a pine branch. The pine tree is considered by the Japanese to be a symbol of longevity, good fortune and steadfastness. The main subject of the kimono is the white *taka*, which in Japan refers to both the hawk and falcon. Falcons and hawks became natural emblems of the Japanese warrior class owing to their keen eyesight, their predatory nature, and their boldness, all characteristics that the boy's parents would want to transmit to their son.

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