

## Audio Guide Transcript

# Shimmering Silks: Traditional Japanese Textiles, 18th- 19th Centuries

March 29–October 20, 2024  
Carolyn C. and William A. McDonnell Gallery 100

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

**STOP 1**  
**McDonnell Gallery 100**  
Introduction

**Speaker**

**Philip Hu**  
**Curator of Asian Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Hello, my name is Philip Hu, and I'm the curator of Asian art at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Welcome to the exhibition *Shimmering Silks: Traditional Japanese Textiles, 18th–19th Centuries*. This exhibition presents a selection of 18th- and 19th-century Japanese textiles from the Museum's collection. Some of the pieces were worn by Buddhist priests during ritual ceremonies, while others were made for special occasions, such as weddings or theatrical performances. There are also examples of textiles made for decorative purposes or as furnishing fabrics.

Whether woven, brocaded, or embroidered, these sumptuous silk textiles are beautifully designed and exhibit very high levels of technical expertise. In order to fully appreciate the details, please do look closely at the materials and motifs on all the pieces.

Most, if not all, of these pieces have not been previously exhibited, in some cases, for more than a century—since 1919, when they were first acquired by the Museum.

Because these textiles have not seen the light of day—or the artificial light in galleries such as this one—for a very long time, the colors are exceedingly well-preserved. In order to keep them in good shape for generations to come, the lighting level in this gallery is deliberately kept fairly low so that any potential fading is minimized during the course of the display period.

I hope you will enjoy this selection of traditional Japanese textiles from the Museum's collection as much as I have in curating this show.

## **STOP 2**

### **McDonnell Gallery 100**

*Nō Costume (karaori) with Design of Weeping Cherries and Clouds*

#### **Speaker**

**Philip Hu**

**Curator of Asian Art**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

Costumes for Nō drama, the stylized traditional theatre of Japan, are known for their exceptional beauty and quality of workmanship. The *karaori* is one of the most important types of costumes for Nō drama, worn by male actors when playing certain female roles.

The short-sleeved *karaori* seen here is made using an elaborate weaving technique that employs gold, paper-covered threads and other colored silk threads, which together create gorgeous floral and cloud patterns. Both the raised and ground patterns are woven with supplementary wefts, creating a multicolor brocade that enhances the stage with its shimmer and luminosity.

The term *karaori* translates as “Chinese weave,” as it is said to be modeled after the Chinese *shokkō* brocade of the Ming dynasty. However, it actually refers to a type of brocade that was developed in Japan from around the 16th century and used in costumes for female roles in Nō theater.

## **STOP 3**

### **McDonnell Gallery 100**

*Woman's One-piece Sash (maru-obi) with Design of Repeating Bands of Boxes for Painted Shells (kaioke)*

#### **Speaker**

**Philip Hu**

**Curator of Asian Art**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

*Obi* are long sashes that wrap around a woman's robe at the waist and are formed into a decorative knot or bundle at the back. There are several varieties of *obi* based on their lengths and shape. Both of the *obi* shown in this display case are of the type known as *maru-obi*.

In Japanese, the term *maru* means "round" or "in-the-round," and the term *maru-obi* indicates that they are fully patterned on both sides. *Maru-obi* are generally between 150 and 170 inches in length and 12 to 13 inches in width, as is the case with both examples here. This type of *obi* was made for formal use. It is heavier and carries the same width for the entire length.

A *maru-obi* has only one seam and has been woven in a continuous repeat pattern and folded over to carry the same designs on both sides. This can be seen on the narrower piece. The wider one nearby has been opened up to show the full width of the design, but the original fold along the center of its entire length can still be seen.

*Maru-obi* were at their most popular during the Meiji and Taishō periods, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though they are nearly all but obsolete nowadays. Their bulk and weight make *maru-obi* difficult to tie by oneself, and thus they are worn only by *maiko*, or apprentice *geisha*, and also by brides in the present day.

**STOP 4**  
**McDonnell Gallery 100**  
*Wrapping Cloth (fukusa)*

**Speakers**

**Philip Hu**  
**Curator of Asian Art**  
**Saint Louis Art Museum**

During the Edo period (1615–1868), it was customary for Japanese people to present gifts on various special occasions, such as weddings, births, or a child's first day of school. Annual festivals, like the celebration of the New Year, also called for the presentation of gifts, which were covered with a rectangular cloth, or *fukusa*, later to be returned to the giver. The design of the *fukusa* was specific to the occasion for which the gift was being presented, and, on a more symbolic level, it served as an indication of the giver's wealth, scholarship, aesthetics, and cultural sensitivity.

In the first part of the 18th century, the custom was in use among the *daimyō* and *samurai* classes of both Edo and Kyoto. During this period the designs were often very subtle, referring to literary sources which would only have been recognizable to these aristocratic classes. As the 18th century progressed a wealthy merchant class emerged, which began to imitate aristocratic customs, including the use of the *fukusa*. They preferred large-scale patterns with more color, and the designs became less subtle and more obvious, like the three *sake* cups, or *sakazuki*, seen here.

Japanese people customarily drink sake from *sakazuki* at significant stages in their lives, as the beverage was considered a purifying agent. Sets of such vessels in three graduated sizes are often used at Shintō shrines for weddings. In a traditional ceremony, both bride and groom would sip sake from each of three cups, starting with the smallest and ending with the largest.

## **STOP 5**

### **McDonnell Gallery 100**

*Buddhist Altar Cloth (uchishiki) with Design of Coiled Dragons amidst Clouds*

#### **Speaker**

**Philip Hu**

**Curator of Asian Art**

**Saint Louis Art Museum**

The largest textile in this case is a *kesa*, a Buddhist monk's robe or vestment worn folded and draped over one shoulder, and fastened over the chest. In India, where Buddhism began, Buddhist monks begged for bits of discarded cloth and patched them together into rectangles that they wrapped about themselves and wore as religious garments. These garments—known in Sanskrit as *kaśaya*—were the ancestors of the Japanese *kesa*.

*Kesa* were traditionally fashioned from remainders of donated garments sewn together into a series of columns. The central vertical column symbolizes the Buddha. The orange patterned squares near each corner represent the deities who guard the four directions, while the two at the top on either side of the central column symbolize attendant bodhisattvas, or the *Ni-o*, guardians who protect the Buddhist Law.

The smaller square textile is a Buddhist altar cloth, or *uchishiki*, made from several pieces of multicolored silk brocade stitched together. The roundels contain coiled dragons while the intervening spaces are filled with stylized clouds.

In a typically Japanese way, these Buddhist pieces take the religiously prescribed textiles as an occasion for the use of rich fabrics with strong designs. The lavish silk brocades were likely donated to Buddhist temples by wealthy lay believers, and at times, even by members of the imperial family.