

Keeping Up with the Kimono Time

Meet two innovative people inspiring fresh ways to accessorize and wear the traditional garment of Japan as part of a modern wardrobe.

by Anne Lucas

Everyone says, “Tokyo has changed.” In many ways, it has. But in an equal number of ways, it has retained its intrinsic traditions and culture. This feeling of old meets new is evident in all aspects of life here, including in the realms of cuisine, architecture, business, and fashion.

Perhaps one of the most obvious and quintessentially Japanese examples of how the city—and the country, no less—has kept its essence alive is in the fact that we still see kimono on the streets, not to mention on the catwalks. Naturally, as everyday style has modernized, this form of attire is not as prevalent as it once was. It is also perhaps looked upon by the youth as out of date and difficult to wear, taking hours to put on for the unaccustomed.

But deep down, whether they are young or old, and whether they will openly admit it or not, all Japanese love and respect their history and deep culture. So instead of simply giving in to the hurdles of integrating the past into contemporary lifestyles, Tokyo is bustling with creative minds continuously coming up with ways to let the two worlds meet. Two people in particular are working hard to inspire a fresh generation of kimono and *yukata* wearers. Writer, illustrator, and kimono *bancho* (boss) Matsuda Megumi and designer for a bespoke kimono tailor Hiramatsu Gen may have different backgrounds and skills, but they are both dedicated to changing the way people view and wear the traditional garment of Japan.

Growing up, Matsuda says, she enjoyed *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print art) but was not too aware of other Japanese cultural traditions. After traveling abroad to study as a teen, she realized that her foreign friends often took the time to learn more about Japan and its traditions than she did. So she began to observe, look, and listen, and immerse herself in cultural activities



© Matsuda Megumi
Kimono Bancho

A light summer kimono styled with a marine theme.



Kimono *bancho* (boss) Matsuda Megumi.

such as kabuki, shamisen (a traditional Japanese stringed instrument) and *rakugo* (a traditional Japanese art of storytelling). Around that time, she explains, there was a boom in vintage shops and she found herself quickly collecting a variety of different kimono of various colors, patterns, and fabrics. Using her skill as an illustrator and combining her love of manga and pop culture, she began creating drawings that show how to wear and accessorize kimono in a more edgy or *kawaii* (cute) fashion. She gathered the illustrations and knowledge into a book called *Kimono Bancho*, and people started calling her kimono *bancho*.



The casual styling of a kimono from the tailor where Hiramatsu works, with undershirt and hat.

Hiramatsu, by contrast, has been working his way up within a traditional Japanese company that has been tailor-making kimonos for over 100 years. While the main clientele of the tailor has historically been largely female, in 2012 they noticed an increase in male customers, so they decided to launch a store selling a special collection for men. Located right next to Kanda Myojin Shrine, one of Tokyo’s oldest and most important shrines, designated to watch over 108 neighborhoods in central Tokyo, including Nihonbashi, Akihabara, and Marunouchi, the store has a most auspicious location.

A seasoned textile designer, Hiramatsu says that while his tailoring is based on tradition, he enjoys playing with coordination and encourages people to pair their kimono or *haori* (traditional Japanese jacket) with casual clothing such as jeans and a T-shirt. His mission is to update Japanese culture to the present day, and with 10 percent of his clientele now international, it seems he is well on his way to achieving this goal.

Although their styles may differ, one thing that Matsuda and the kimono tailor where Hiramatsu works have in common is their effective use of the internet and social media for attracting new readers and customers. As a result, both have fans from around the world and of varying ages, from 20 up to 70. A quick glance at Matsuda’s Instagram account conveys her sense of playfulness. For example, she favors bright, bold hues and candy colored jewelry; she might recommend using a scarf that your mother used when you were young as an *obi-age* (a kimono accessory that is used to help keep the upper part of the obi belt knot in place). The kimono tailor where Hiramatsu works, on the other hand, presents a more subdued approach with chic tones of navy, sky blue, black, gray, and beige taking center stage.

For both creatives, it is clear that they are highly respectful of kimono traditions, enjoying the age-old allure of the unseen, or the features of which we can only catch a glimpse. At the same time, they understand that the key to updating the look lies in the accessories—and perhaps, ultimately, the attitude.



© Matsuda Megumi
Kimono Bancho

Sandals and record shaped earrings complete the rock themed styling of this *yukata*.