

# KIMONOS

## ART AND SOCIAL STUDIES

### Based on

Robert Frederick Blum (1857–1903)

*The Silk Merchant, Japan*, 1890–93

oil on canvas

19 1/2 x 50 1/8 in.

Gift of the Procter & Gamble Company,

2002.149

### Concept

Cincinnati artist Robert Blum captures the simple beauty of the traditional Japanese kimono in his painting *The Silk Merchant, Japan* from 1890–93. Japanese kimonos have an intriguing history, evolving through periods of foreign exchange and extended isolation.

### Objectives

1. Students will learn that Japan's history of trade or isolationism impacted the development of the kimono.
2. Students will design a kimono and obi, based on Japanese themes or those of another culture, including their own.
3. Older students will apply a technique used by Japanese artisans—such as block printing, resist dyeing and embroidery—to make their own kimono or obi.

### Materials

kimono design paper	crayons
printing ink and blocks	fine point markers
watercolor paints	printmaking tools
colored paper	assorted fabrics
embroidery thread	glue
scissors	dyes
needles	puff paint
oil pastels	Internet
glitter	Japanese fairy tales

### The History of the Kimono

#### Heian period (794–1192)

Geographically, Japan is protected by water, so influence from foreign cultures could be limited or encouraged by the rulers of the time. For many years, vigorous trade existed between Japan and her neighbor China. The valuable secret of sericulture, or silk production from silkworms, was revealed through this trade. China's narrow sleeved silk tunic inspired Japan's early garments, but in 894, Japan broke contact with China.

Native Japanese dress originated during this golden age of Japan with luxurious, twelve-layered costumes called *junihitoe*. The undergarment of the *junihitoe*, a *kosode*, became the first kimono (translated as “thing worn”).

#### Kamakura period (1192–1338)

With the rise of the military class, the elaborate *junihitoe* seemed excessive. Japanese ideals of simplicity and functionality were reflected in the austere white *kosodes* of women in the Kamakura period.

#### Momoyama period (1573–1614)

The *kosode* evolved once again during this period, assuming its present asymmetrical design. Hand painting, block printing, embroidery, and resist or tie-dyeing methods transformed the basic *kosode* into an elaborate work of art.

#### Edo period (1603–1868)

Under the isolationist period of the Tokugawa shogunate, foreign contact was very limited, but domestic trade flourished. Confucianism and a strict four-class system were adopted within Japanese society, and clothing reflected status. The ruling samurais wore a three part outfit consisting of a kimono, a *kamishimo* (a sleeveless garment with starched extended shoulders) and a *hakama* (a split skirt). Wealthy samurai females wore fashionable *kosodes* called *uchikake*, reserved now as a bridal kimono. Stencils and rice paste, used in the paste-resist dyeing method called *yuzen*, allowed artists to create very complex patterns in kimono textiles. The obi, or waist sash, began to be tied in the back, instead of the front of the kimono.

In 1854, America's Commodore Perry forced the Tokugawa government to open ports to international trade. Trade still remained very limited until 1868.

#### Modern Japan (1868–present)

In 1868, under the Meiji Restoration, Japan was reopened to the world. Western clothes or *yofuku*, were worn by wealthy women for formal affairs, but the traditional kimono remained for everyday and holiday dress.

# CLASS ACTIVITY

Today, kimonos are worn by women, children and men for special occasions such as festivals, weddings, funerals or tea ceremonies. Wide-sleeved kimonos worn by unmarried women are called *furisodes*. Like butterfly wings, *furisode* sleeves are very colorful, featuring ornate designs to capture the eye of a young man. Children may also wear *furisodes* at celebrations like the *Shichi-Go-San* Festival (“seven-five-three”) to thank the gods for the good health of children at age three, five and seven. Once a woman is married, she wears a short-sleeved *tomesode*, distinguished by decoration only at the bottom of the garment. In warm weather, both men and women may wear the informal, cotton *yukata*.

Traditional kimonos echo the Japanese sense for harmony, simplicity of design and an appreciation for natural materials, such as fine silk. Slight imperfection is admired, so asymmetrical designs are preferred over those, which are symmetrical. Decorations often feature the seasons, elements in nature, including chrysanthemums, streams, maple leaves, bamboo, pine trees and plum blossoms or stories of sea adventures by Japanese heroes. Japanese kanji or calligraphy, might also be used in the design.

Tied at the middle by an obi, the tightly wrapped kimono restricts an individual’s movement, forcing the wearer to move slowly. Flat bottom zori sandals or raised heel geta sandals worn with tabi socks also encourage a slow, thoughtful gait.

## Pre-Lesson(s)

### Primary: K–5

Examine Blum’s *The Silk Merchant, Japan*, with your students. Ask them to compare their own clothing to the Japanese kimonos in the painting. Help students locate Japan on a map. Explain to students that the Japanese have worn kimonos for hundreds of years. (Refer to historical information.) Sometimes, Japanese kimonos tell a story. Read a Japanese fairy tale with your students. Ask students: What did you learn about Japan from the story or illustrations?

### Intermediate: (6–8)

### Secondary: (9–12)

Examine Blum’s *The Silk Merchant, Japan*, with your students. Ask them to compare their own clothing to the Japanese kimonos in the painting. Using the historical information provided, explain how the Japanese kimono changed through periods of isolation or trade.

Students can explore pre-selected web sites on kimono designs. Have them create a list of design themes, patterns and colors or they can create a 5-slide PowerPoint presentation featuring their favorite designs. Be sure that they cite the source of each slide. Discuss the symbols and techniques found in these kimonos.

## Procedure

Examine Blum’s *The Silk Merchant, Japan* with your students. Ask them to compare their own clothing to the Japanese kimonos in the painting. Using the historical information provided, explain how the Japanese kimono changed through periods of isolation or trade.

Students will create a kimono and obi, featuring heroes, stories, seasons or designs of nature from the Japanese culture or from another culture, such as their own.

- Time, space and budget may restrict the size and materials available for kimonos made in the classroom. Students may sketch their ideas on the kimono worksheet, then create a doll-size version using fine tip markers, crayons, oil pastels, watercolor paints, colored paper, fabric pieces, puff paint, and/or glitter.
- More elaborate kimonos could incorporate techniques used by Japanese artisans, including block printing, dye resist techniques or embroidery on fabric.

## Critical Thinking

1. What material is the shirt or dress you are wearing? Check the label. Do you think this material is expensive to manufacture? Compare your clothing to silk kimonos. Why do you think they are so expensive to make? (Hint: What is sericulture?)
2. How have other cultures influenced the clothing of the United States through history?
3. Look at the labels on other items around your classroom. Did you find anything from another country? In your opinion, does trade help or hurt the American economy? Justify your answer.

## National Visual Arts Standards

- Students will identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.
- Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artwork.

## National Social Studies Standards

### Living and Working Together in Families and Communities, Now and Long Ago: Grades K–4

- Students should understand family life now and in the past, and family life in various places long ago.
- Students should understand the history of the local community and how communities in North America varied long ago.