

**Statement Sleeves at The Museum at FIT: The Kimono Sleeves  
Following the American Psychological Association's Guidelines**

Karlique Caesar

Department of Business, CUNY New York City College of Technology

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Dr. Alyssa Dana Adomaitis

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The definition of dress proposed by Joanne Eicher and Mary Roach-Higgins (1992), establishes itself on the analysis of properties of dress and the connected social, cultural and political context of the properties as mentioned earlier of dress. A few of these properties that craft this definition include color, values and proportions, and most importantly for the topic at hand, shape and structure. The silhouette of an article of clothing may just be the single most important concept to the philosophy of design. In most entry-level art or design courses, students are taught to first break their ideas up into silhouettes, building upon the form with layers of shapes until the design becomes something identifiable to the untrained eye (Fikaris, 2021). This is the goal of design. To translate the context of the world around us into physical form. The process of doing so requires focus on minute details that can very often be taken for granted. If one were to think of their favorite shirt it could easily be assumed that self-justifications as to why this shirt leaves such fond memories is because of an idea like “This shirt just looks good on me!” If asked what about it *makes* it look good, one may be expected to struggle to answer that question on a more technical level. More often than not a strong contender for what makes this article of clothing work would be the sleeves.

The Museum at FIT has curated a beautiful collection of the evolution of sleeves in their current exhibition as of Spring 2024 titled *STATEMENT SLEEVES*. The exhibit showcases sleeves throughout time attached to various articles of clothing. The dark paint on the walls is juxtaposed against the bright color of most dresses which is especially exemplified by the color study, featuring articles of clothing designed by the houses of Thierry Mugler, Balenciaga, and Valentino, on display directly in front of the entrance. The history of sleeves is well documented on sight with examples stretching from iconic looks such as Leg-of-Mutton sleeves that staked their claim to the cultural lexicon in the late 19th century to more contemporary upcycled pieces

from Christian Francis Roth's work in the 90s. The exhibition presents itself as a very comprehensive look at the history of sleeve design primarily from a Western perspective. The article of clothing that is the topic of this paper seeks to analyze the development of the sleeve in another part of the world.

The article of clothing this paper spotlights is the "Black silk and velvet striped man's robe circa 1925". The robe in question features kimono sleeves, a technique of garment creation derived from Japan that had gained popularity in the Western world during the early 20th century due to designers such as Paul Poiret due to the controversial trend of "Orientalism" (English and Munroe, 2022). The history of the kimono also relates to Western influence in Japan. The article of clothing called "kimono" directly translates to "something to wear" or "wearing thing" in English (Green, 2017). The name of the article was changed to kimono after Japan faced "modernization" at the hands of Western imperial forces. The original name of the article was "kosode" which had directly translated to "small sleeves". The interesting thing about kimonos is the fact that they give off such a boxy appearance in terms of fit. The reason for this appearance is that kimonos are made from one sheet of fabric to create the article of clothing (Green, 2017). For a more contemporary example, this is the same technique employed by many Yeezy pieces to give that unique, boxy fit. The kimono in question is not an authentic Japanese kimono however the general design and production philosophies still apply.

The color of the garment is actually a shade and tint, those being black and grey. These shades are normally associated with Japan which feels very appropriate for a piece that is based on a Japanese article of clothing. The reason that these shades have been associated with Japanese fashion is due to the rise of the Japanese New Wave design philosophy headed by designers such as Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo (English and Muroe, 2022). This Japanese

movement would not take place until after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with that event heavily inspiring the shift in the fashion eye excluding the Eastern world as anything other than gimmick wear (English and Munroe, 2022). With the garment being made in 1925 there is clearly no way that these trends in design can have had any influence on the design but there is room for other possibilities as to the choice of garment shade. As per Bell's (2001) explanation of color psychology, black has been used historically to promote ideas of night activity, mystery, intrigue, and sexual stimulation, and gray brings about an air of sophistication. All of these themes directly correlate to the situation in which this kimono would have been worn concerning its use in the Western world.

The use of line as an element of design is strong in this piece. Design first begins with a silhouette and the kimono provides a strong and easily identifiable one. The straight lines intersect beautifully presenting a strong "T" shape to the garment. According to Bell (2001), straight lines provide a sense of strength, pride, and majesty directly correlating with the color scheme presented previously to indicate that any man wearing this kimono is bold, mysterious, and of value. The lines presented on the design itself are of diagonal orientation. Diagonal lines represent action and force but most importantly the lines imply that the man wearing this garment is dynamic, capable of switching on a dime to keep their suitors guessing.

The rhythm of the design may at first glance appear to just be perpetual repetition following all the way through. The unique form of the kimono however would provide a well-employed shift in the design repetition if worn on the body. This implied change can subconsciously lure onlookers viewing this piece on a person to almost be hypnotized or set in a trance watching for the movement that breaks all they believe to know. The psychological effects

of the design repetition when paired with the colors employed in the design create a simple yet alluring design.

All of this is possible due to the form of the kimono. The kimono's one-fabric sheet design process forces the designer to think carefully about the design of the fabric as much as the design of the garment. In traditional Japanese society, kimonos were adorned with hand-painted artwork that would serve as wearable artwork in the most traditional sense (Green, 2017). This design philosophy has been respected in this Western piece although the art at display is more representative of a contemporary art piece of the time.

Balance can be achieved by the use of symmetry or asymmetry to achieve a sense of itself (Bell, 2001). The way that balance is employed in this garment is through the juxtaposition of the grey and black asymmetrical lines. Through the use of diagonal lines, the viewer's eyes follow each line leading nowhere. This desperation to solve the puzzle of the garment's design is its biggest appeal. One's eyes can be lost trailing the lines with no center in sight forcing the viewer to focus on the person wearing the garment and applying all of their intrigue and interest on the familiar face floating in the uncertain sea of stripes.

Juxtaposition can be defined as the effect invoked due to the contrast of two design elements being placed against each other (Bell, 2001). The clearest form of juxtaposition present in this garment is the boxy shape of the kimono sleeves. The overall boxiness of the sleeve draws attention to the sleeves and the wearer. This is directly complimented by the hypnotic nature of the alternating black and grey stripes and the general shapelessness of the kimono allowing an onlooker just a glimpse of the body underneath leaving the rest as a surprise. The result is an additional route of intrigue added to the tally of the wearer.

Dominance represents the most common trait affecting balance. The most common trait affecting the balance of the garment can easily be identified as the lines. The diagonal lines were purposely meant to throw off the balance of the fabric design. Allowing the lines to wrap the entire body made for an easily identifiable dominant design element. The dominance of the lines on this garment assists greatly in carrying the themes of intrigue.

Proportion is explained as the size and space hierarchy that is present within a design (Bell, 2001). The exaggerated proportions present on the sleeves of the kimono very clearly set up the hierarchy of the garment's design. The sleeves provide an almost cloak-like drape over the body allowing the shape of the individual to dictate how the striped pattern will express itself. The overall focus on the widened sleeves leaves an undeniable silhouette that carries the piece effortlessly even before the consideration of the fabric design itself.

Every design starts with a silhouette. That silhouette is a statement of massive power. Dress covers all walks of life but no two people walk the same. In the article, *The Surprising History of the Kimono* it is mentioned that the name of the kimono had changed from kosode to kimono. "Small sleeves" to "just something to wear". That represents a loss of love to even distinguish the type of garment they wore after their culture was slowly phased out by Western imperialism (Green, 2017). Even something as "simple" or "trivial" as the sleeve serves a great purpose in self-expression. It's important to remember that every part of clothing serves a purpose and even sleeves can make a strong and impactful statement.

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