



Kyo-yuzen kimono with autumnal persimmon and chrysanthemum motifs
Photo: Ota Junichi

KIMONO BRINGING ELEGANCE TO AUTUMN IN KYOTO

Kyo-yuzen is a technique developed in Kyoto for dyeing kimono. This technique traditionally values a feeling of seasonality, and seasonal scenes are reflected and drawn. In autumn, motifs such as maple trees, chrysanthemums, and bush clover are used to depict the unique emotions of autumn.

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KIMONO dyed with motifs of autumn, such as the leaves of maple trees described in Japanese classical poems or the chrysanthemums of ancient temples, are like paintings. The *yuzen-zome* technique, in which silk is dyed to produce pictures of birds, flowers, landscapes and other things in vivid colors, was developed in Kyoto in the latter half of the 17th century and spread around the country. The *yuzen-zome* techniques in Kyoto are

specifically called *Kyo-yuzen*¹.

Fujii Tomoko is president of Sairin, a long-established artisan company making Kyo-yuzen fabrics. She says, “I think people in Kyoto prefer Kyo-yuzen that express the four seasons using colors which are *han’nari*, meaning “vivid yet soft” in the Kyoto dialect. There are also many designs called *kotengara* (classic pattern) that are Kyoto-like, expressing an aesthetic unique to Japan since the Heian period (end of eighth century to twelfth century).”

The kimono (pictured) passed down from Tomoko’s mother features a motif based on the Tatsuta River that flows through Nara Prefecture, which borders Kyoto. Tatsuta River is a standard pattern for autumn. This river is a scenic spot for the autumn leaves written about in many ancient *waka* poems, including the following composed by Ariawara-no-Narihira and translated by William N. Porter, 1909: “All red with leaves Tatsuta’s stream / So softly purls along, / The everlasting Gods



A Tatsuta River motif is used on this kimono worn by Fujii Tomoko. Saga chrysanthemums from Daikakuji Temple can be seen on the semi-formal kimono fabrics in the center
Photo: Ota Junichi

themselves, / Who judge 'twixt right and wrong, / Ne'er heard so sweet a song.”ⁱⁱ

There is another autumn *Kyo-yuzen* of refined design which features Saga chrysanthemums that have been improved over generations through cultivation of a chrysanthemum that once grew on the grounds of Daikakuji, a famous temple in Kyoto (see pp. 18-19, “Moon-viewing Party”). Even today, flower baskets decorated with scenes of ginkgo and other autumn leaves blowing in the



Hand-drawing chrysanthemums on *Kyo-yuzen* fabric
Photo: Ota Junichi

wind, persimmons, bush clover, and other autumn flowers are also popular as autumn motifs.

Normally, a writing brush is used with hand-drawn *yuzen*, but at Sairin, they use a *hake* brush, which is wider than a writing brush. This brush requires a more skillful technique, but by using the *hake* brush, even tightly woven silk fabric can be dyed to the thread's core. Also, instead of applying the background color to the entire fabric, a pattern is expressed and dyed little by little with the *hake* brush.

This distinctive feature of Sairin's fabrics was developed through great effort by Tomoko's predecessor and her father, Hiroshi, a so-called *sensho* (dyeing artisan). *Sensho* is a job unique to *yuzen*. It was born when hand-drawn *yuzen* was created. *Sensho* direct their thoughts on design and colors to each artisan of the roughly 15 steps. Under their direction, each artisan applies their technique to one kimono. Among them, a single person handles the coloration, which takes



Yellow green *obijime* and light blue *obiage*, the upper parts of the kimono's *obi* belt, selected to match the autumnal colors of the kimono
Photo: Courtesy of Sairin

around 20 days. The artisan creates a limitless variety of colors by combining 20 to 30 dyes together.

Fujii Hiroshi No Kimono, the main brand of Sairin, has earned a reputation for its delicate and elegant gradations, and they are referred to as “royal colors” as Hiroshi has received orders from members of the Japanese Imperial family and has had his work worn at official occasions. An artisan working at Sairin's studio says that using the same red dye, the shade can be made brighter for spring and darker for autumn. They often walk near the Kyoto Imperial Palace, observing and taking note of the shadows in the colors of the trees.

The *obiage* (the cloth decorating the upper part of the *obi*), *obijime* (the string wrapped around the center of the *obi*), and other kimono accessories are paired differently according to color for each *Kyo-yuzen* kimono that has been painstakingly dyed. At the start of autumn, crisp colors are used, and as autumn progresses, deeper colors are used. *Kyo-yuzen* kimono with autumn designs coordinated and worn in this way can be said to suit the ancient capital of Kyoto's subdued autumn scenery, while bringing extravagance and elegance. 

i *Kyo-yuzen*, a technique to produce traditional Kyoto kimono, is characterized by glue application called *itome* to control the spread of dyes and by dyeing directly to silk fabric with a brush. It is said that Miyazaki Yuzensai, a folding fan painter who was active in Kyoto in the latter half of the 17th century, began dyeing kimono with the patterns he had painted himself. The technique is striking for its many colors, elegant designs capturing the beauty of nature, and gorgeous effects.

ii See *Highlighting Japan* October 2020, “The Colors of Fall Captured in *Waka* Poetry” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202010/202010_02_en.html