AS WE ARE NOW
SO SHALL YOU ONE DAY BE

Skeleton Motifs in Japanese Kimono

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Remember me as you pass by;

as you are now so once was I.

As I am now so you shall be;

prepare for death and follow me.

Early american epitaph of Lot William, 1772

As We Are Now, So Shall You One Day Be, Skeleton Motifs in Japanese Kimono ©2025
From the Historical Textile Collections of Erik Jacobsen
Introduction written by Erik Jacobsen- adapted from original text by Jacqueline Marx Atkins
Collection descriptions written by Jacqueline Marx Atkins
Skeleton Motifs in Japanese Kimono Essay written by Jacqueline Marx Atkins
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Introduction

For centuries, skeletons, skulls, and bones, have been considered important symbols of talismanic and religious faith in Japan. The Meiji period, (1868 -1912), was a time of profound cultural transformation, as Japan moved away from its traditional isolationist policies and embraced westernization. The era saw the integration of new ideas and technology, leading to a synthesis of old and new traditions in various aspects of Japanese life, including art and design. Skeleton motifs, previously used primarily in kabuki costumery, became a faddish subject of modern textile design in the late 18th century. They still represent death, but artistic scenes with skulls lying in the grass under on moonlit nights with dark clouds overhead, became popular, a poetic interpretation of the impermanence of existence. In some scenarios, skeletons play games, dance and frolic in lighthearted depictions of life after death.

During the Taisho (1912 to 1926), a large number of garments with skeleton designs were commissioned by wealthy merchants to wear in the amusement quarters of town. Although most men wore western clothing in those years, the skeleton designs were used on traditional garments. Worn under dark kimonos, the imagination was let loose with the provocative and innovative skeleton designs on the interior linings of their clothing. They were something to be enjoyed as entertainment among a small circle of friends at intimate parties in private rooms, where a playful atmosphere prevailed. Japanese bourgeoisie considered this kind of exclusive leisure activity as very chic. It was a brief and singular moment in the long history of Japanese art and design.

This collection presents an unparalleled example of an obscure and little known historical niche in the creation of Japanese textile art. It stands out not only for its rarity, but also for its philosophical depth. Each example is a thought provoking invitation to explore mortality not as a distant concept, but as an ever present reality woven into the fabric of our existence. They urge an acceptance of the transient nature of the human condition, and serve as a source of liberation rather than fear.

Garment Types in the Skeleton Kimono Collection

Drawn primarily from Japan's Taishō and early Shōwa periods (1912–1945), the garments in this collection represent informal and semi-formal, non-ceremonial and deeply modern attire. Each type offered a distinct opportunity for expression, often worn in urban settings by those embracing individuality and avant-garde aesthetics.

Nagajuban (Underkimono)
Worn beneath the outer kimono, nagajuban were typically invisible in formal settings, with only glimpses at the collar or sleeve. In this collection, they feature hidden skeleton and skull motifs—playful secrets reflecting a modern, rebellious spirit.

Haori (Short Jacket)
An outer jacket for both men and women, haori became increasingly popular in early 20th-century casual wear. The linings (urahaori) often concealed surprising designs, and skeleton motifs were used as witty, ironic reveals in stylish social settings.

Yukata (Unlined Summer Kimono)
Lightweight and worn during leisure, festivals, or at bathhouses, yukata allowed for bold, public expressions. Skeleton designs on these garments catered to fashion-forward wearers in cities like Tokyo and Osaka, reflecting the energy of youth culture and modern taste.

Kimono (Outer Garments)
While formal kimono retained traditional motifs, casual versions embraced novelty (omoshirogara) designs—including skeletons. These were worn by modern individuals drawn to visual puns, irony, and a layered aesthetic blending East and West.

Obi (Sash)
Though rarer, obi with skeleton designs provided a strong visual statement, tying the ensemble together with a bold motif that centered mortality and wit at the heart of the outfit.

No. 1, Haori
40” x 49”

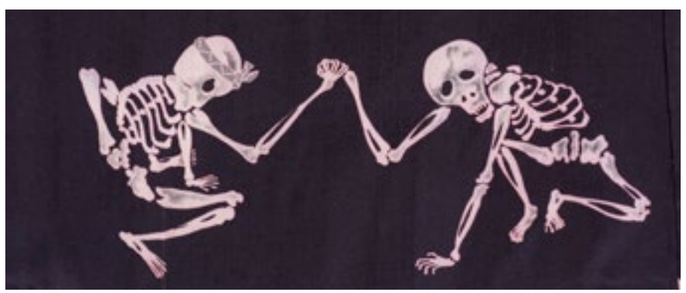
A skeleton plays a *shamisen* (a traditional long-necked Japanese instrument) while a companion dances to the music on this creative design that dominates this haori lining. Although the autumn grasses hint of nozarashi style, the skeletons’ pleasure in their activities fits more closely with the humorous gaikotsu style popularized in the 19th century in Japan and revived in the 1920s and 1930s.

No. 2, Nagajuban
55” x 49”

This is an exceptional nagajuban both in fabric and in design. The semi-transparent textile allows for the design, which appears to be hand-painted, to be seen on both sides of the fabric, giving an impression that the design includes a greater number of images than are actually there. The motifs generally follow the nozarashi style, although the skeletons are shown as fully articulated. They seem to move in puzzlement through the grassy field, as though they are not yet sure where they belong. The artist seems to have presented the group almost as a family unit, with older and younger members, some of whom look to hold hands with each other. This creates a poignant sense of melancholy that permeates the design, clearly differentiating these skeletons from the playful gaikotsu of so many other designs.

No. 3, Haori
34” x 48”

Many of the energetic skeletons depicted on this textile show off their physical prowess by walking on their ‘hands’ or arm wrestling. Some sport headbands to keep the sweat raised by their exertions off their ‘faces.’ Like many of the more humorous depictions of skeletons, these activities serve as reminders that all humans are alike under the skin in the activities they enjoy.



No. 4, Nagajuban
55” x 50”

This extraordinarily graphic hand-painted erotic design would have gained much attention at a male party. Shunga (erotica) was a popular genre for woodblock prints in the Edo period, and the central image of a man making love to two courtesans may well be based on such a print. The images on the sleeves, however, send a message that anticipates the final and less pleasant destination for the lovers. The left sleeve shows an Oni, one of the demons who oversees the punishments in hell of those who did not lead a blameless life; the right sleeve depicts a skeleton kneeling by a grave marker—possibly intended for one of the participants shown.

No. 5, Haori
41½" x 52"

The artist Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889) was a master in his humorous depictions of skeletons taking part in the activities of everyday life, and the ones that appear in this textile design were clearly based on this artist's work. The images of the skeletons playing Go (a board game), engaging in a bout of kubihiki (a rope-pulling contest), and arm wrestling were taken from the pages of Kyosai Donga (1881), one of Kyosai's illustrated books that gained great popularity.[1] The wood grain pattern used as the ground for this design is an interesting choice.

1 See Plate 73 (p. 153) in Comic Genius: Kawanabe Kyosai. Tokyo: The Tokyo Shinbun, 1996.

No. 6, Nagajuban
51” x 50”

A bleached skull, autumn grasses, and an image of an elegant dressed oiran, a courtesan of the highest rank, captures the essence of nozarashi style in the design for this nagajuban. Falling petals serve as a further reminder of the transient nature of life and beauty.

No. 7, Hanten

A fireman's style hanten textile, made of 2 layers of cotton stitched together for strength. This is the image of the beautiful semi historical courtesan known in Japanese folklore as Jigoku Dayu, (the Hell Courtesan). She is celebrated for her alleged encounters with an eccentric Zen Buddhist priest named Ikkyu (1394 to 1481). The two were said to have had a relationship, and exchanged poems, which ultimately led to her enlightenment. Here she stands in a ring of fire over a skull, possibly representing Ikkyu. She's surrounded by a spider web, which can reference a dual nature in Japanese folklore; both frightening and

alluring at the same time. Spiders are frequently portrayed as femme fatales, highlighting their seductive power. On the front of the garment, a wild boar; which in Japanese folklore traditionally symbolizes courage and strength, as well as recklessness. In ancient times, boars were considered sacred and were believed to be a divine messenger of the gods.

No 8, Haori
55” x 50”

Numerous gaikotsu cavort in this lively design that seems to celebrate the freedom of death as captured in the “Perfect Happiness” chapter of the Daoist Chinese classic Zhuangzi. The skeletons dance, play music, and even participate in a bout of kubihiki, a rope-pulling game in which two participants sit face to face and tug against a circle of rope around their necks. The first to be pulled over loses, and a skeleton referee monitors the bout to make sure no rules are flauted. This is representative of the humorous style often found in skeleton imagery.

No. 9, Nagajuban
52” x 50”

This is a beautiful example of the nozarashi motif. The skull and bones scattered in the autumn grasses and the full moon slightly masked by clouds offer a bittersweet moment for contemplation of the fleetingness of life.

No. 10, Nagajuban
51” x 50”

This sleek nagajuban shows fiery scenes of a hell dominated by the terrifying demon minions of Enma, the Buddhist Lord of the Underworld. The demons are shown carrying out Enma’s sentences on those unfortunates who have been sent to hell, but the role of the gaikotsu is not quite clear. Are they celebrating the work of the demons, or are they escaping from the underworld that once claimed them? Or are they reveling in the freedom that others do not have? What is clear, however, is that this design falls within the Jigoku-dayū style of skeleton-related designs.

No. 11, Nagajuban
59” x 50”

The *sotoba* (a wooden grave marker for the repose of the dead) that float across both front and back of this garment is inscribed with “Namu Amida Butsu” (“Homage to Infinite Light”), a sutra used in the Pure Land school of Mahayana Buddhism. The deconstructed skeleton is representative of the nozarashi style and underscores the random scattering that would occur as bones are exposed to the elements.

No. 12, Haori
34” x 50”

These skeletons are playing, drinking, dancing, and generally enjoying “life” as they parody the activities of those still in the natural world. One vignette shows a skeleton oiran (the highest ranking courtesan) accompanied by five attendants as she does her daily promenade. Another vignette pictures a musician for a Noh play who plays a *kotsuzumi*, a small shoulder-held hand drum; an *otsuzumi* (a knee drum), rests on his femur, and a chant book lays nearby, ready for use. Perhaps the most surprising vignette shows a skeleton enjoying tea while listening to a 1920s-style radio that sports a horn as its audio device. These skeleton figures and their activities, like others in the collection, resemble the satirical depictions that the artist Watanabe Kyosai (1831-1889) produced in the late 19th century and are an amusing example of gaikotsu style.

No. 13, Nagajuban
52” x 50”

The skeletons in this gaikotsu design show a playful aspect as they entertain themselves and each other. Food and drink is part of the lively event, as indicated by the stacked food boxes and the large sake container and cups. The shading used to delineate the skeletal figures adds an unusual touch to the design.

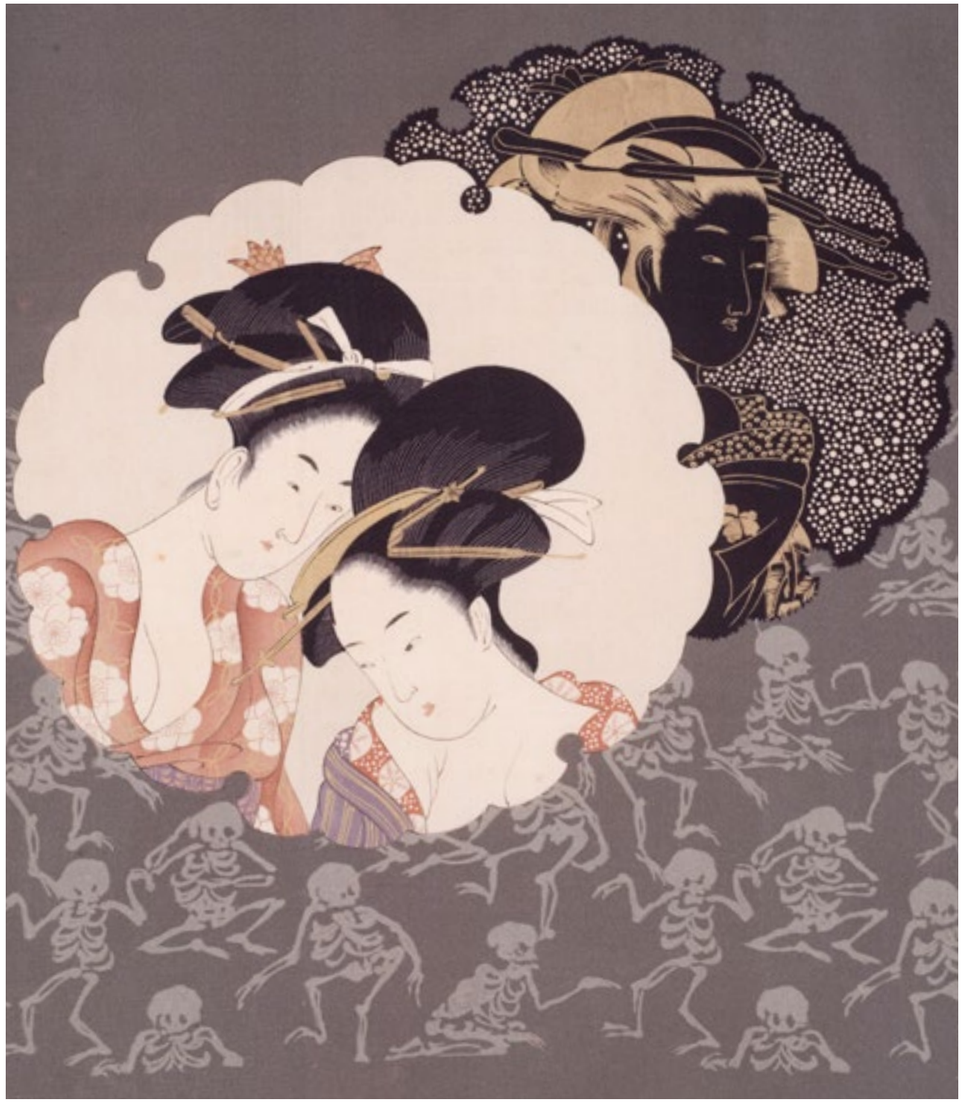
No. 14, Hanten
34” x 34”

A somber mood is created in the stenciled design on this hanten (a worker’s jacket). The bleached bones, scattered in a field of sketchy autumn grasses, a skull with a snake winding through it, and a broken *sotoba* (a wooden grave marker for the repose of the dead) capture the wabi-sabi aesthetic of “serene melancholy”[1] that is a also hallmark of nozarashi imagery. Nozarashi motifs were often used to decorate firemen’s jackets (*shoubou hanten*) as these designs were thought to be symbolic of courage and preparedness. This hanten does not appear to be a fireman’s jacket, but the owner may have chosen the design to indicate that his profession had some risk to it.

1 Andrew Juniper, Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence. Tuttle Publishing, 2003.

No. 15, Haori
41” x 50”

Some of these gaikotsu images are familiar, but this designer added a few witty touches of his own. Here we have two skeletons riding skeleton horses and another one learning how to ski. Many of the other motifs—skeletons wrestling, drinking, dancing, and so forth—appear on many of the examples in this collection.



No. 16, Nagajuban
50” x 51”

The primary vignette on this nagajuban shows two courtesans, one perhaps comforting her colleague. The figure in the secondary vignette appears to be listening to the confidences exchanged by the first two; the dark patterning adds a slightly sinister aura to the scene. The women reflect the style of Utamaro and his contemporaries who excelled in presentations of beautiful women from the pleasure quarters of Edo, and this designer may well have copied one of their many woodblock prints. The text near the vignettes refers to individuals “adrift in a floating world” and is likely part of a traditional poem. This part of the design is very much on keeping with nozarashi style, although the skeletons engaged in activities such as those the courtesans may have carried out in life add a lighter touch.

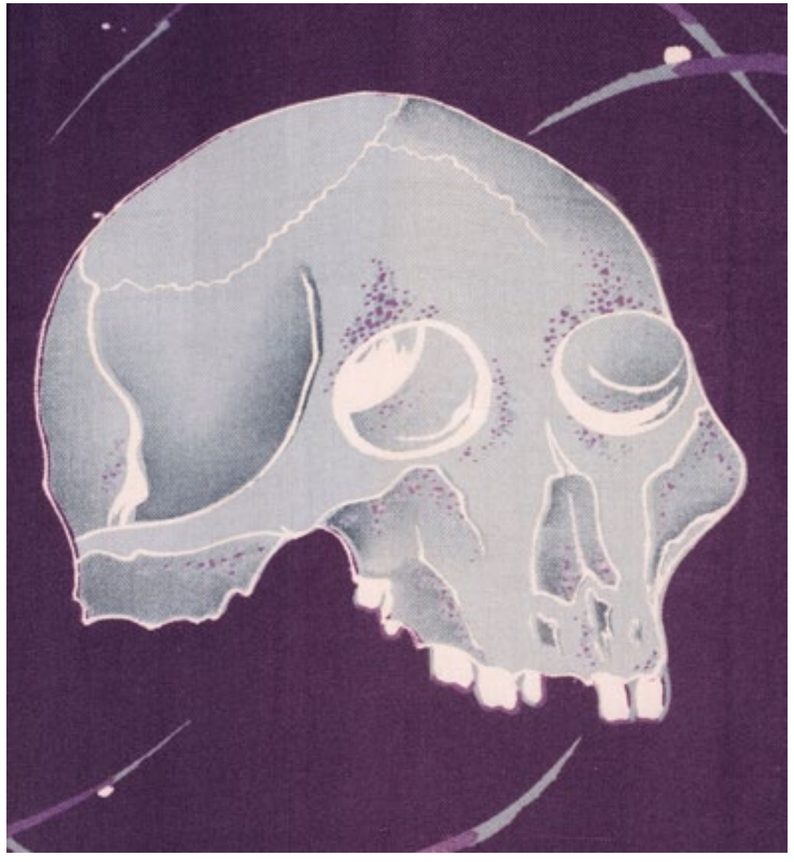
No. 17, Kimono
51” x 51”

This simple nozarashi motif places bleached skulls over the name seals of many well-known Japanese artists such as Jakuchu and Ogata Korin as well as scholars such as Rai San’yo, a writer and historian of the Edo period. The numerous name seals representing such literary and artistic luminaries indicate that the owner of this garment may have wished to emphasize his intellectual interests through imagery rather than through talk.

No. 18, Nagajuban
54½" x 52½"

These skeletons are engaging in activities both literary and popular. One sits engrossed in a book while a lively kubihiki competition takes place behind him. A wrestling match with a referee is in progress while a drummer and dancer entertain two enthusiastic onlookers. The text appears to be a poem; although its origin has not been determined, it refers to "the floating world," "a far distant place," and skeletons who dance to the sound of "broken" or "torn and rent drums."1 The small seal that appears as part of the design uses unknown archaic Chinese characters that may represent a name, but its purpose may be more decorative than informational. (This design also appears on the textile used in

1 "Torn and rent drums" is an idiom for wrecked or shattered humans, which can be interpreted as the scattered bones of skeletons.

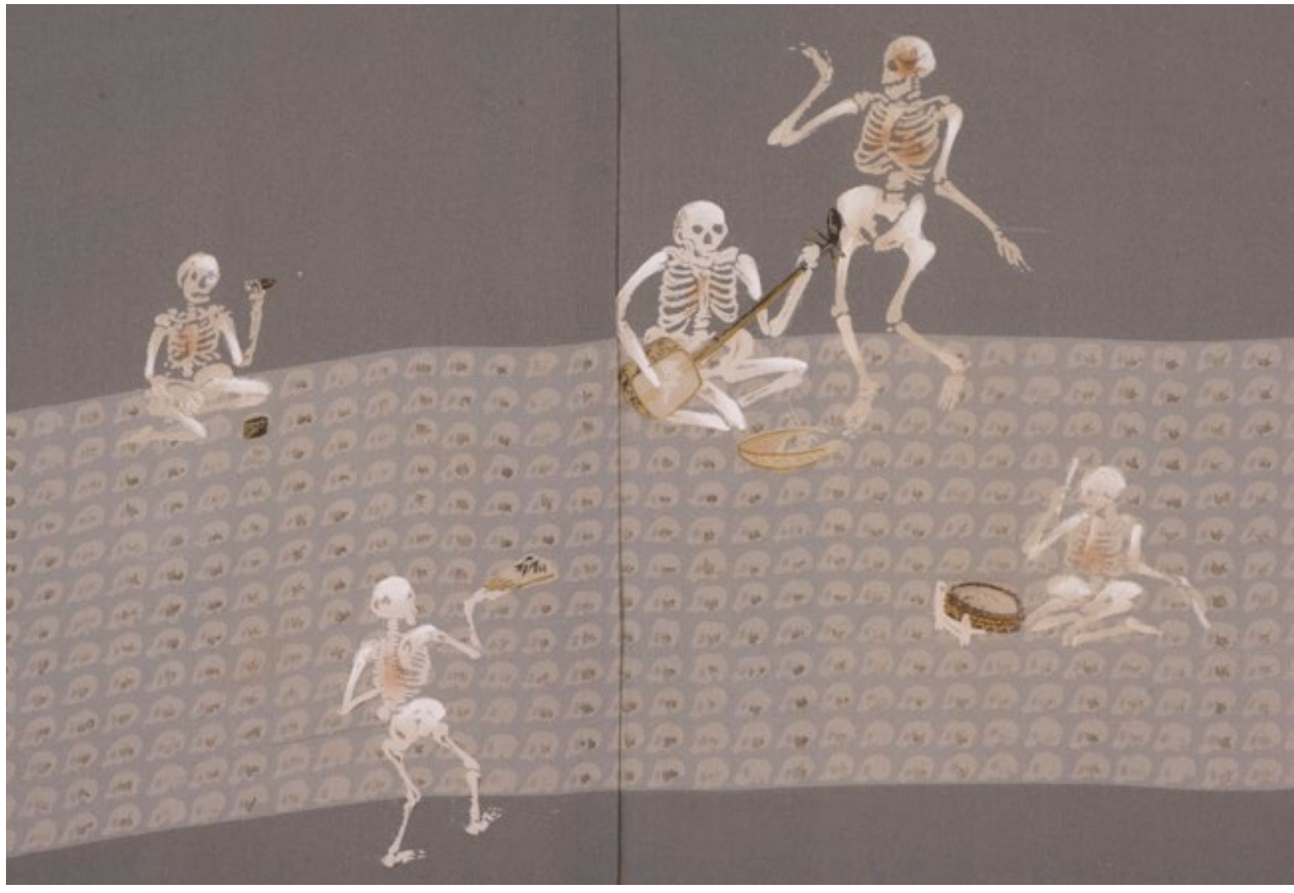


No. 19, Nagajuban
54” x 50”

This nozarashi design emphasizes life as transient through the bleached skulls that are prominent motifs for this style. The arched lines represent autumn grasses, also a common element of designs representing transience. The variation in size and color of the three repetitive skulls offers a sense of rhythm to the design. Nozarashi motifs often feature a few lines of poetry, but here the designer holds to the most basic elements. It is quite likely, however, that the wearer could have supplied several poetic possibilities when showing off this garment.

No. 20, Nagajuban
55” x 50”

Against a formal background of hundreds of carefully placed skulls, five skeletons entertain themselves with music and dance. The design seems to be a composite of sharekobe style (repetitive skulls) and the playful gaikotsu style. The joining of the two styles of motifs provides a simple, yet elegant, design.



No. 21, Haori
44” x 52”

The design of this textile, with its bleached skulls and blocks of traditional Chinese poetry, follows a traditional nozarashi format. The blocks of text seemed at first to serve as strictly decorative elements, but additional study shows that they contain fragments from lyrical poetic works of Tang origin.1 The textile designer probably took the poetry from *Three Hundred Tang Poems*, an anthology first compiled around 1763 by Sun Zhu (1722-1778) and read by Japanese literati. For unknown reasons, the poems have been grouped into text blocks rather than presented as the seven-character quatrains they would have been originally. The blocks do, however, offer an aesthetic contrast that plays well against the skulls, but makes the identification of the poems somewhat difficult.2 (This textile is the same as that used in the nagajuban seen in #15.)

1 Pauline Yu, “Chinese Poetry and Its Institutions,” in Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry, Volume 2, Grace S. Fong, editor. Montreal: Center for East Asian Research, McGill University, 2002.

2 Two poetic fragments included in the blocks that have been identified are “Willow Leaf Lyric,” by Liu Yuxi (772-842 AD), and “Hearing Flute-playing on the Great Wall,” by Gao Shi (704-765 AD). My thanks to Sidney Atkins for tracking these poems down.

No. 22, Nagajuban
54” x 51”

Although this pattern is well-populated with skeletons, the humor and liveliness that marks gaikotsu designs is absent here, and the overall mood captures the more somber nozarashi style. This is in keeping with the stylized Sanskrit text included in the design; it is taken from the Heart Sutra, a cornerstone of Mahayana Buddhism that uses the concept of emptiness to underscore the impermanence of life and all things.1 The inclusion of the procession of a skeletal courtesan and her attendants emphasize this theme.

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1 Copyright 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 by C. George Boeree, retired Professor of Psychology, Shippenburg University, Pennsylvania. See http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/heartsutra.html

No. 23, Haori
43” x 54”

In this design, skeletons wrestle (under the watchful attention of a referee), play Go (a board game), dance, play traditional instruments, and generally have a good time. Some of the poses and activities seem to be based on those seen in the work of Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889), but they are drawn in a more stylized and simplified manner than seen in Kyosai’s finely defined style that captures the human essence undisguised by flesh.

No. 24, Nagajuban
52” x 51”

The design of the textile used in this garment follows the pattern of traditional nozarashi format, with its bleached skulls and blocks of traditional Chinese poetry. The blocks of text are not strictly decorative elements but contain fragments from lyrical poetic works of Tang origin, probably from Three Hundred Tang Poe ms, an anthology first compiled around 1763 by Sun Zhu (1722-1778) and read by the Japanese literati.1 For unknown reasons, the designer chose to group the poems as text blocks rather than in their original seven-character quatrains. The blocks do offer an aesthetic contrast that plays well against the skulls, but makes the identification of the poems somewhat difficult.2 (This textile is the same as that used in the haori seen in #5.)

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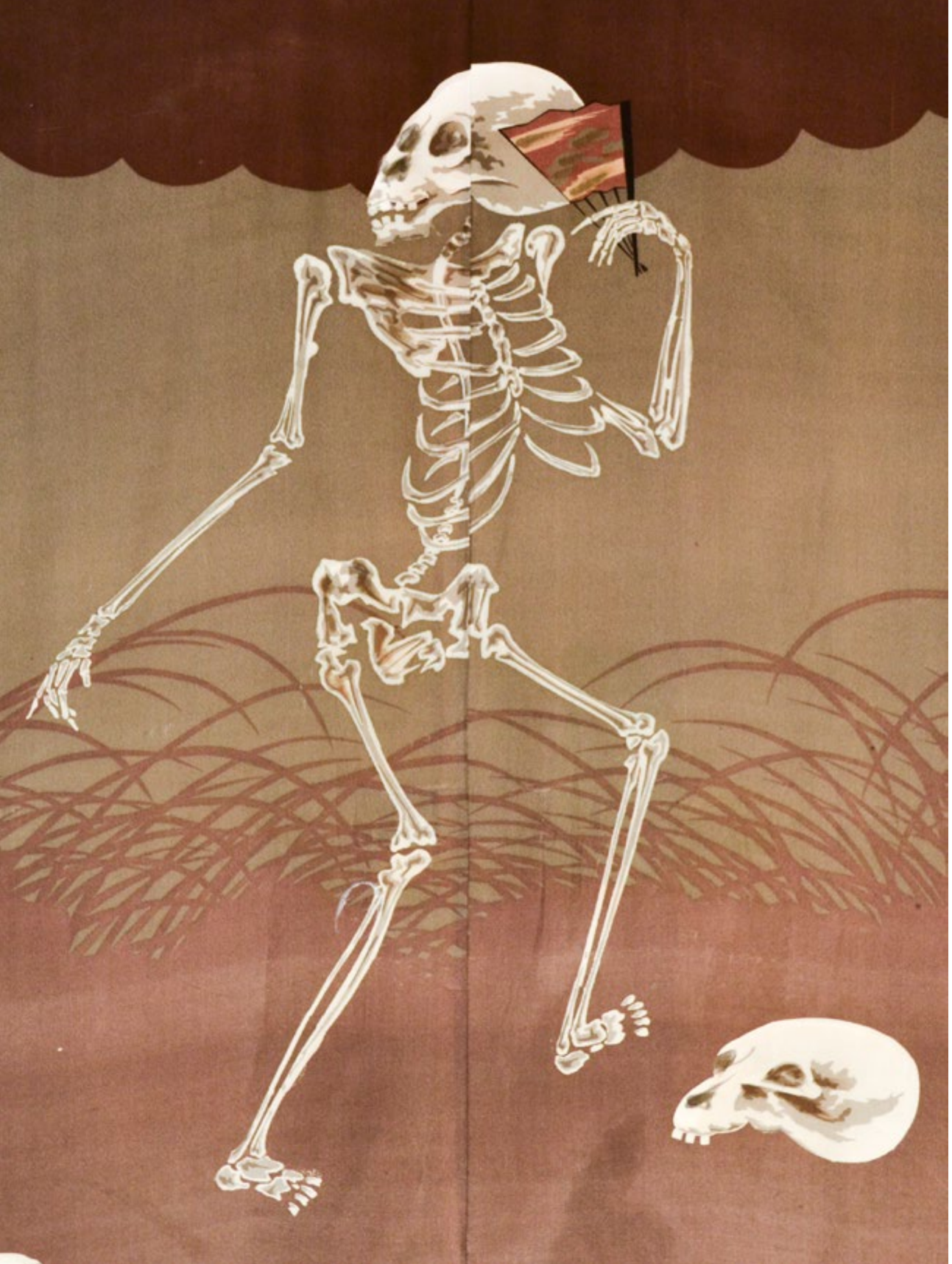
1 Pauline Yu, “Chinese Poetry and Its Institutions,” in Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry, Volume 2, Grace S. Fong, editor. Montreal: Center for East Asian Research, McGill University, 2002.

2 Two poetic fragments included in the blocks that have been identified are “Willow Leaf Lyric,” by Liu Yuxi (772-842 AD), and “Hearing Flute-playing on the Great Wall,” by Gao Shi (704-765 AD). My thanks to Sidney Atkins for tracking these poems down.

No. 25, Nagajuban
52" x 51"

In this elegantly simple nozarashi design, a skull and a beautiful courtesan are paired. It is a stylized version of the encounter between the beauteous courtesan Jigoku Dayū (the "Hell" courtesan) and the Zen priest Ikkyū, represented here by the skull, a symbol of the staff topped by a skull that Ikkyū carried about each New Year as a reminder to revelers of the inevitability of death. Although the celebrated courtesan is usually depicted in an elaborate kimono decorated with scenes of hell, the designer chose to show her here in unembellished garments, perhaps as a reference to her spiritual enlightenment after her meeting with Ikkyū. The design may have been inspired by *Courtesan and Skull* (1903), *a kuchi-e* by Eisen Tomioka (1864-1905), as the courtesan's pose on the nagajuban is much the same as that seen in Tomioka's work.



No. 26, Nagajuban
56½" x 51"

Here the nozarashi motif is joined with a gaikotsu image of a skeleton strolling through a field of scattered skulls and bones. The skeleton holds a fan to its head as it coyly looks back over its shoulder and may have been based on a painting said to be by the nihonga artist, Takeuchi Seihō (1864-1942), in which a skeleton also holds a fan in a coquettish manner as it strolls along.1 Although the Seihō work does not include the nozarashi motifs seen in this design, the skeleton images are remarkably similar.

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1 The painting appears in http://en.rocketnews24.com/2014/05/29/macabre-japanese-ukiyo-e-reveal-gothic-side-to-art-of-the-floating-world [pics]/. I have not been able to verify whether the painting is indeed by Seihō, or determine its location, although it is known that this artist produced some skeleton paintings in the early years of the 20th century. Some of his work also served as cartoons for textile designs for embroidery and yūzen dyeing, although there is no evidence that skeletons formed part of that work. (Ellen P. Conant, "Cut from Kyoto Cloth: Takeuchi Seihō and his Artistic Milieu," Impressions: The Journal of the Japanese Art Society of America, No. 33, 2012: 70-93.)

No. 27, Hanten
43” x 51½”

The pattern on this hanten, probably worn by a fireman, is hand-painted inside and out. One side shows a bleached skull and bones, a moon floating through the cloud-specked night sky, and autumn grasses, all nozarashi motifs. The other side shows dramatically stylized lightning-like forms flying beneath the stormy heavens. These vivid and sinuous forms represent the long, serpentine body of the dragon, a deity of rain and water, one of the guardian animals of the four directions, and a symbol incorporated by the Chinese into Buddhist thought and iconography as a protector of Buddhist law. The nozarashi motifs shown on the one side were often used to decorate firemen’s jackets (*shoubou banten*) as they were thought to be symbolic of courage and preparedness, necessary attributes for men in this profession. The dragon motifs, with their ties to water and rain, also provide an appropriate design element for a fireman.

No. 28, Haori
44” x 51”

Skulls and bones form the primary motif on this garment, bringing it within the nozarashi genre. The small bones that float throughout the design serve as reminders of the meaning of nozarashi: bodies or bones exposed and scattered in a field. The archaic name seals included in the design are highly stylized representations that would have been used by artists, poets, and high-ranking courtesans, but they are not readable.

No. 29, Haori
43½" x 51"

The large portrait vignette in this design represents King Enma, the chief judge in the afterlife. He is the one who will decide the afterworld to which the dead person will go. Those deemed sufficiently bad are sent to Jigoku (Hell), the land of eternal toil and punishment. The figure sitting near Enma is an Oni, one of the demons who oversee the punishments in hell. The skull represents the transience of life, after which all must face the sentencing of Enma.

No. 30, Nagajuban
54" x 51"

This design is quite interesting, although initially a little difficult to decipher. It appears to be a reference to the legendary encounter between the courtesan Jigoku Dayū (the 'Hell' courtesan) and the Zen priest Ikkyū, although neither of the principals is shown. They are, rather, represented symbolically, Ikkyū by the skull resting on a *hossu* (flywhisk),1 which stands in for the skull-topped staff that the priest carried at New Year's to remind revelers of their own mortality, and Jigoku Dayū by the *noren* (curtain) that hangs in the entryway. It is inscribed with the hiragana character ya ('shop') and perhaps represents the entrance to the teashop where the courtesan practiced her trade. The two pines bracketing the entryway are traditional decorations to welcome the New Year, again a reference to Ikkyū.2

1 The flywhisk is a Buddhist implement that priests carry at funerals and memorial services where it symbolizes the brushing away of earthly cares and desires.

2 Several woodblock prints that depict the priest Ikkyū and Jigoku Dayū include similar untrimmed pines. See, for example, Ogata Gekko (1859 - 1920), The Hell Courtesan, from the series Gekko's Essays, ca. 1887; and Kunisada II (1823 - 1880), Priest Ikkyū and the Hell Courtesan, 1865.

No. 31, Nagajuban
53½” x 50”

The bands of text that float through the design of this garment are in stylized Sanskrit and show the Heart Sutra, possibly the best known text of Mahayana Buddhism. This sutra deals with the concept of emptiness, a foundational doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism.1 The strong diagonals, bold triangles, and structured layout of the design offer a sense of modernity and are a departure from the usual presentations of the nozarashi theme. The ordered rows of repetitive skulls (a *sharekobe* motif) may seem to contradict the sutra’s emphasis on ‘emptiness,’ but the Buddhist interpretation offers a less nihilistic view in the sense that emptiness can ultimately lead to full enlightenment.

1 Copyright 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 by C. George Boeree, retired Professor of Psychology, Shippenburg University, Pennsylvania. See http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/heartsutra.html

No. 32, Nagajuban
47” x 48½”

These skeletons are engaging in activities both literary and popular. One sits engrossed in a book while a lively *kubihiki* (rope-pulling) competition takes place behind him. A wrestling match with a referee is in progress while a mer and dancer entertain two enthusiastic onlookers. The text appears to be a poem; although its origin has not been determined, phrases in it refer to “the floating world,” “a far distant place,” and skeletons who dance to the sound of “broken” or “torn and rent drums.”1 The small name seal that appears as part of the design uses archaic Chinese characters and remains unread. It may be largely decorative and certainly adds an air of antiquity to the design. (This textile is the same as that used in the nagajuban seen in #3.)

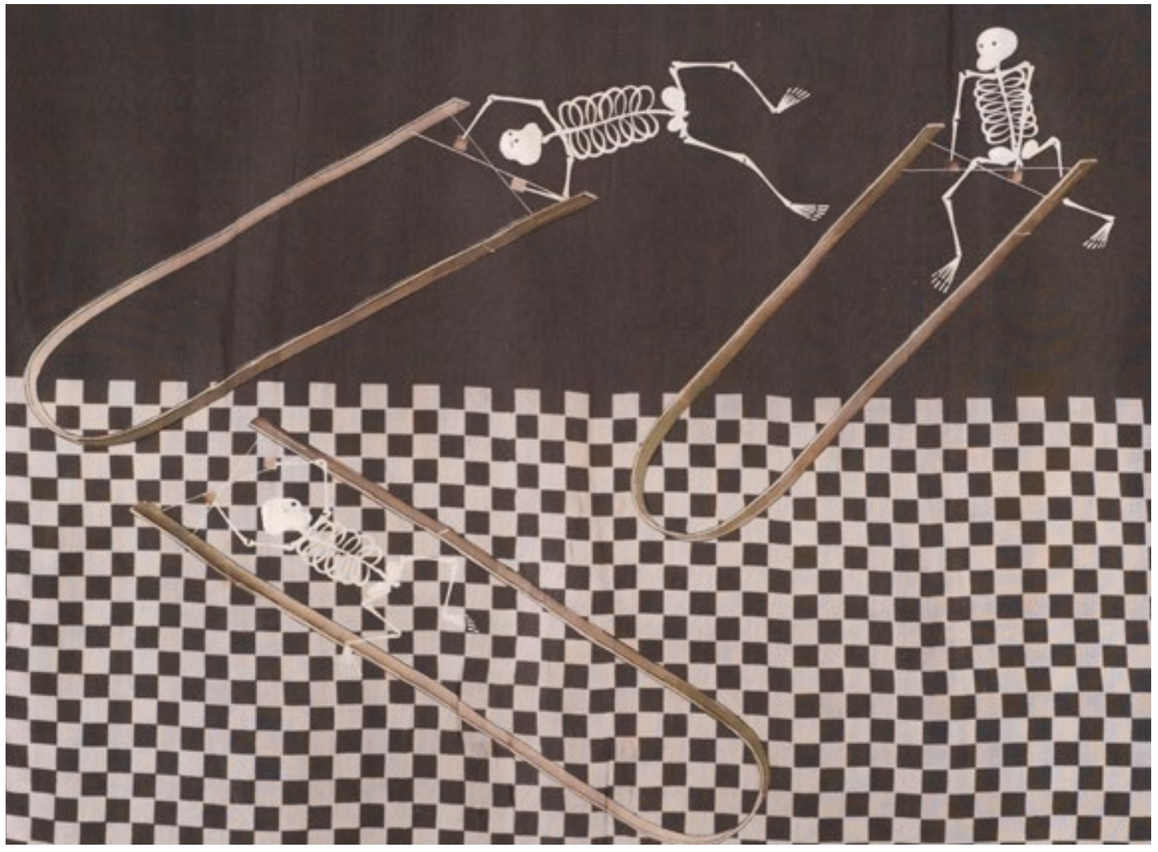
1 “Torn and rent drums” is an idiom for wrecked or shattered humans, which can be interpreted as gaikotsu, or skeletons.

No. 33, Naga Juban

A snake approaches two skulls and bones among the grasses. In traditional Japanese imagery, a snake among skulls typically invokes the cyclical nature of life and death, with the skull symbolizing mortality, and the snake embodying rebirth and transformation.

No. 34, Haori
36” x 49”

The skeletons depicted on this haori are especially lively, and all are either dancing or playing musical instruments. Some of the ‘musicians’ play traditional instruments such as *kotsuzumi* (small shoulder-held drums), otsuzumi (knee drums), or shamisen while others use more modern instruments such as violas, trumpets, French horns, or an elaborate drum-and-cymbal combination. All seem to be having an exceptionally good time enjoying their ‘after-life’ gaikotsu status.



No. 35, Nagajuban
54” x 52”

The skeletons here are engaged in an odd sort of game that I have not been able to identify. The U-shaped bamboo pieces that the skeletons cavort on give a sense of flexibility but do not help to explain their use. The flowing stream offers more clarity; it stands as a symbol of constant change as well as of the transient nature of the world and what it contains. The checkerboard pattern that extends from sleeve tip to sleeve tip provides a dramatic element that enlivens the garment’s general simplicity.

No. 36, Haori
40” x 49”

Following the vices of their human counterparts, the skeletons in this design are immersed in some serious card playing. The Portuguese brought playing cards to Japan in the 16th century, and the two card games shown here grew out of the original Portuguese games. *Hanafuda* (“flower cards”) is a game in which card suites are pictorial and often have designs based on seasonal flowers. It is a common and popular game in both Japan and Korea and usually includes gambling for money. A skeleton foursome plays hanafuda here, and, if the skeleton expressions can be used as a guide, at least one is very unhappy with his cards. A twosome plays *karuta* (from the Portuguese “carta”), a game where the cards carry some text, such as lines of poetry, proverbs, or kana (the characters used for hiragana and katakana) that must be matched or completed by other cards.

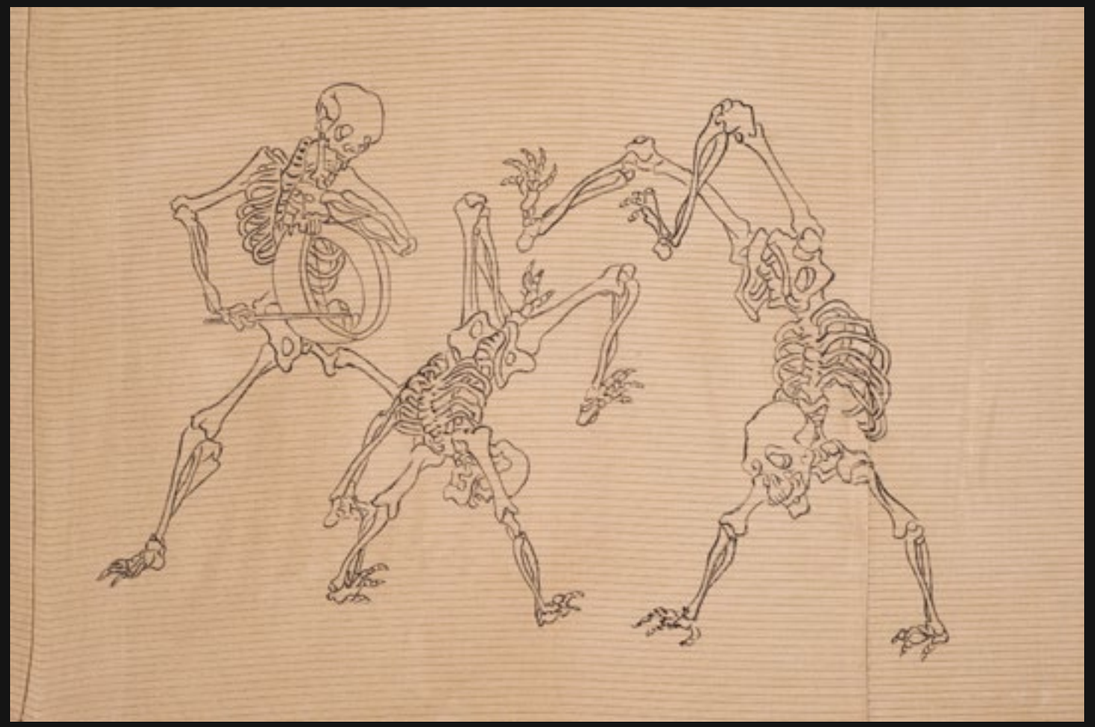
No. 37, Nagajuban
54½” x 62”

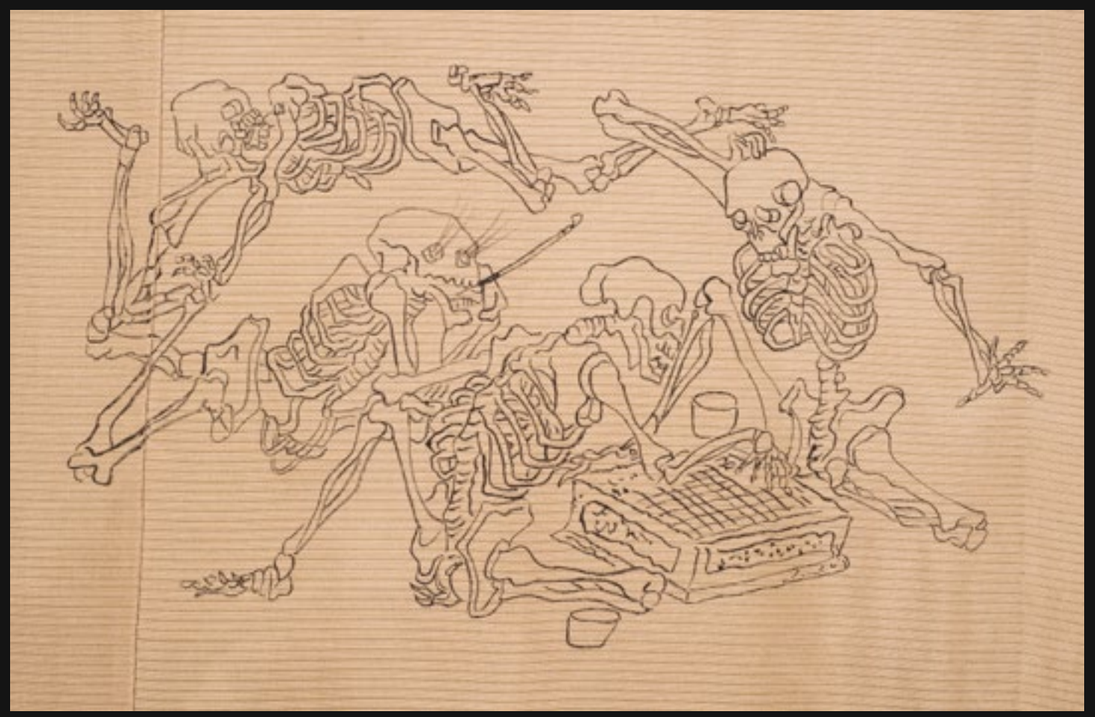
These repetitive skulls are more painterly than those usually seen in the sharekobe style and so it seems more appropriate to assign it to the nozarashi style, despite the lack of usual elements such as autumn grasses, a moon, and snippets of melancholy or liturgical text. There may be some text included in the background, but it is unreadable here. The use of repetitive skulls seems to be a choice that is often favored for men’s less formal undergarments. This design is very similar to that used in the haori seen in #44, although there no text is visible on that one. The skulls on that textile are also spaced further apart, with fewer overlapping each other.

No. 38, Haori
40½” x 51”

The skeleton images on this haori are clearly based on ones drawn by the artist Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889). He was adept at drawing large groups of figures and seemed to delight in satirical depictions of skeletons behaving as though they were taking part in all the activities of normal everyday life. The skeletons shown here were modeled on ones found in illustrations done by Kyosai for his book *Kyosai Donga*, published in 1881.1

1 See Plate 73 (p. 153) in Comic Genius: Kawanabe Kyosai. Tokyo: The Tokyo Shinbun, 1996.





No. 39, Haori
39½” x 53”

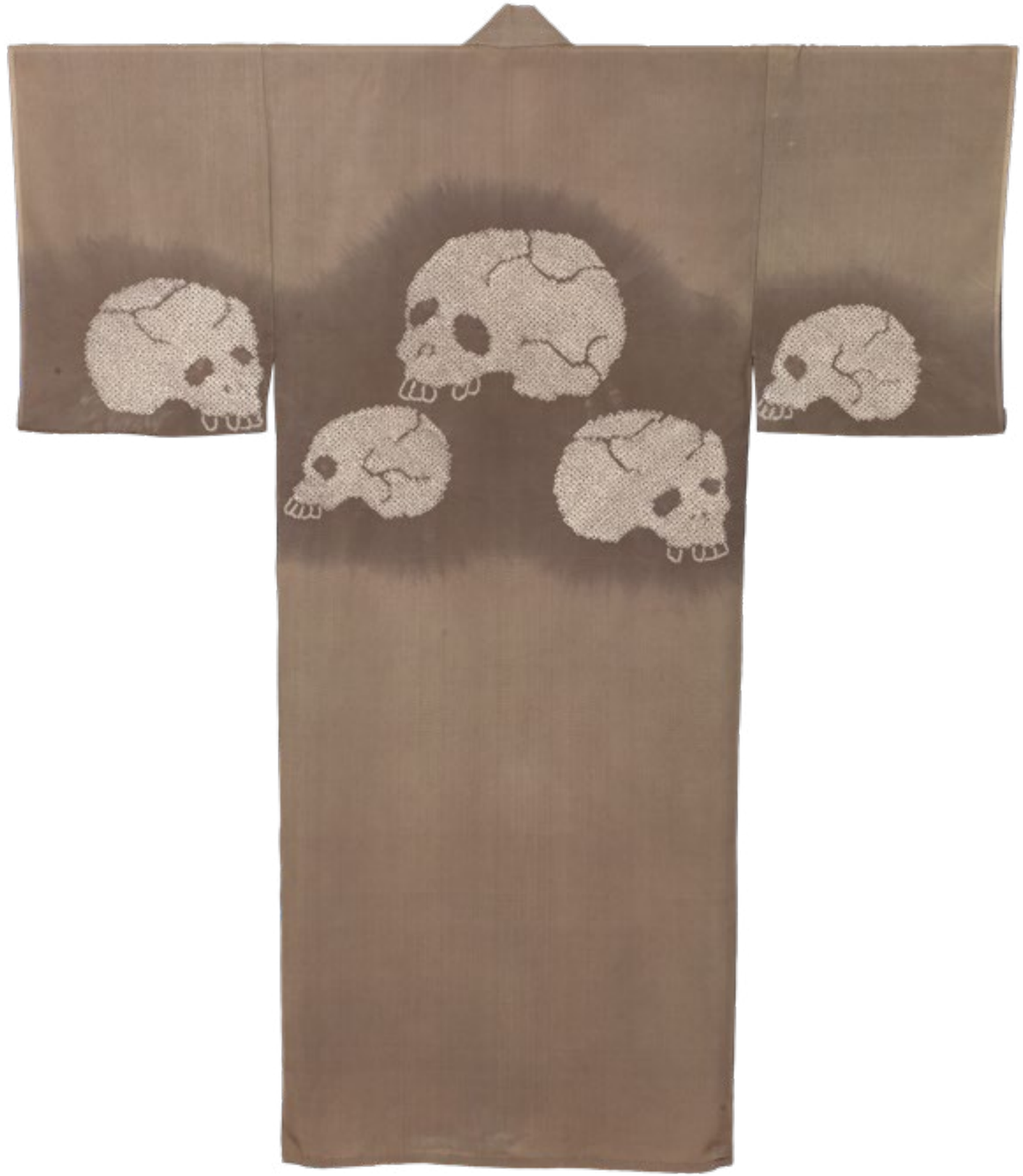
These repetitive skulls are more painterly than those usually seen in the sharekobe style and so it seems more appropriate to assign it to the nozarashi style, despite the lack of usual elements such as autumn grasses, a moon, and snippets of melancholy or liturgical text. The use of repetitive skulls seems to be a choice that is often favored for men’s less formal undergarments. This design is very similar to that used in the haori seen in #41, although there does not appear to be any background text and these skulls are spaced further apart, with fewer overlapping each other.

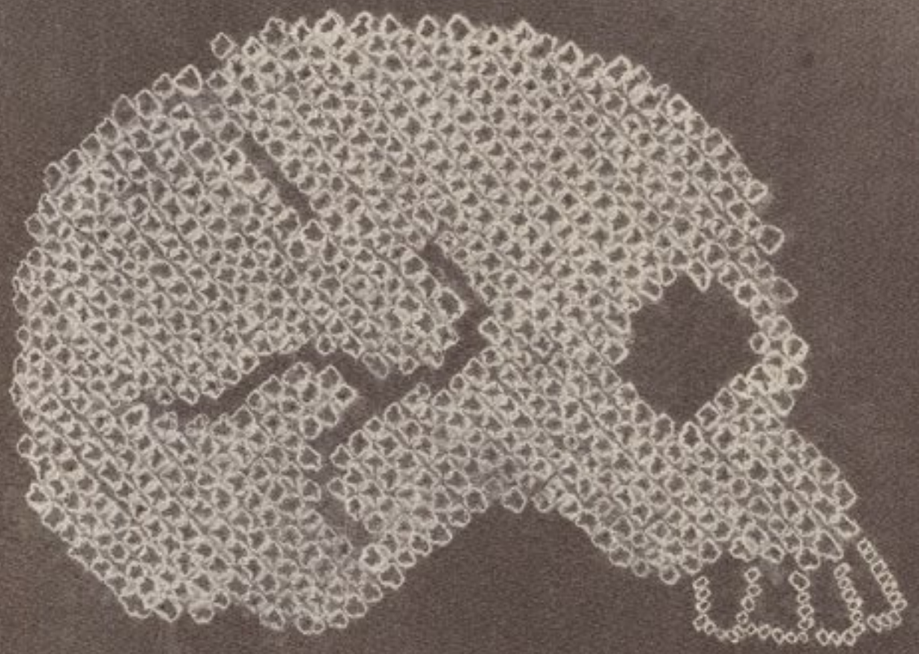
No. 40, Kimono
56” x 50”

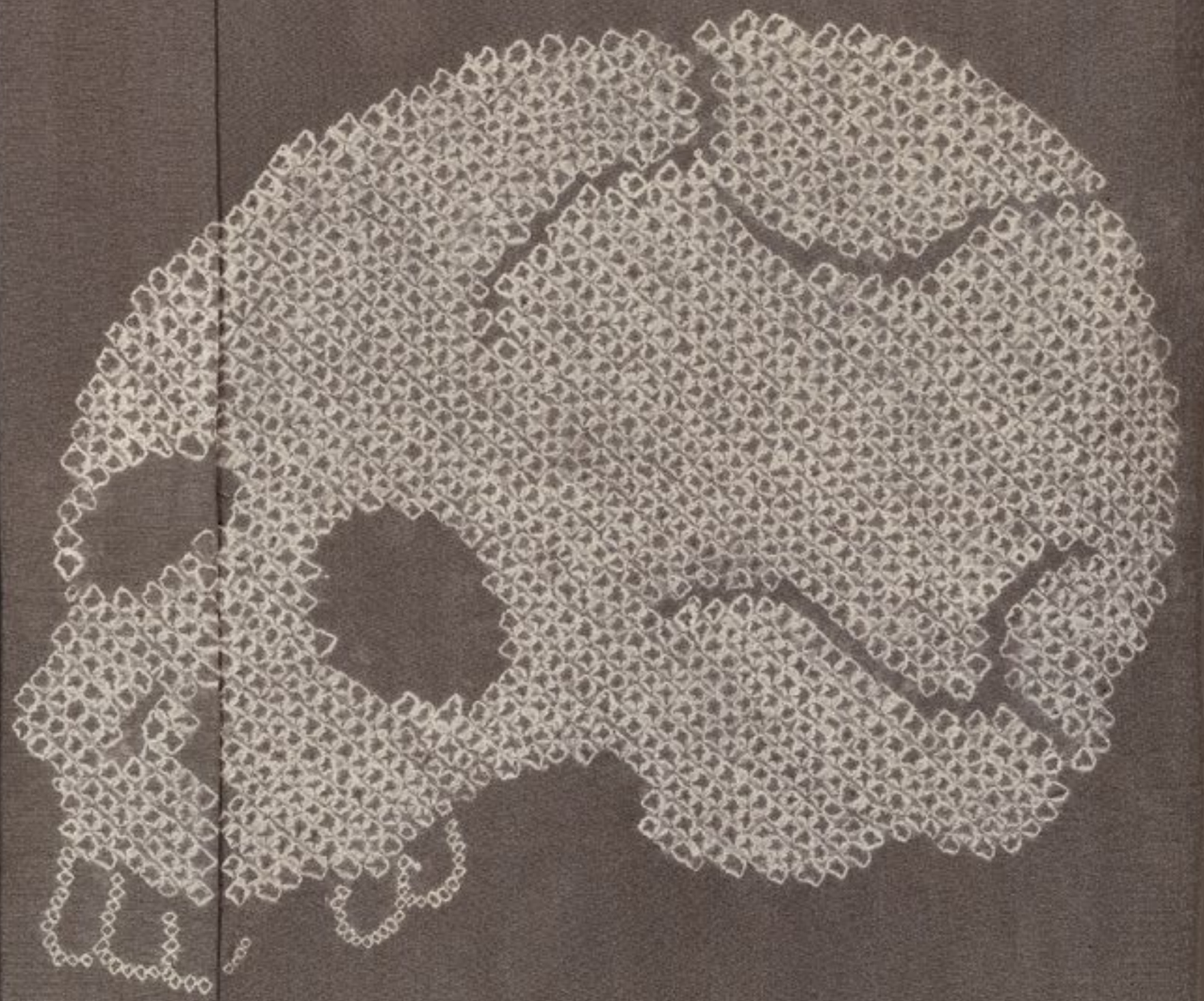
Tiny skeletons run riot over this kimono as they dance, play instruments, or simply frolic for the fun of it. There is, overall, a lighthearted and humorous aura to the images designed for the textile used for this garment.

No. 41, Kimono

Large skulls are depicted on the front and back of this kimono. Their stencil dyed to mimic the technique of Shibori, or tie dye.







No. 42, Haori
44” x 51”

The repetitive sets of paired skulls that form the design for this textile could be viewed as nozarashi style at its most basic to express the designer’s version of the emptiness of life. The lack of any other motif, however, is more likely to point to sharekobe style.

No. 43, Haori
40” x 52”

The bleached skull and bones resting in a field of autumn grasses and bathed in the glow of a harvest moon indicate that this depiction is intended to represent the nozarashi style of design.

No. 44, Obi
146” x 12”

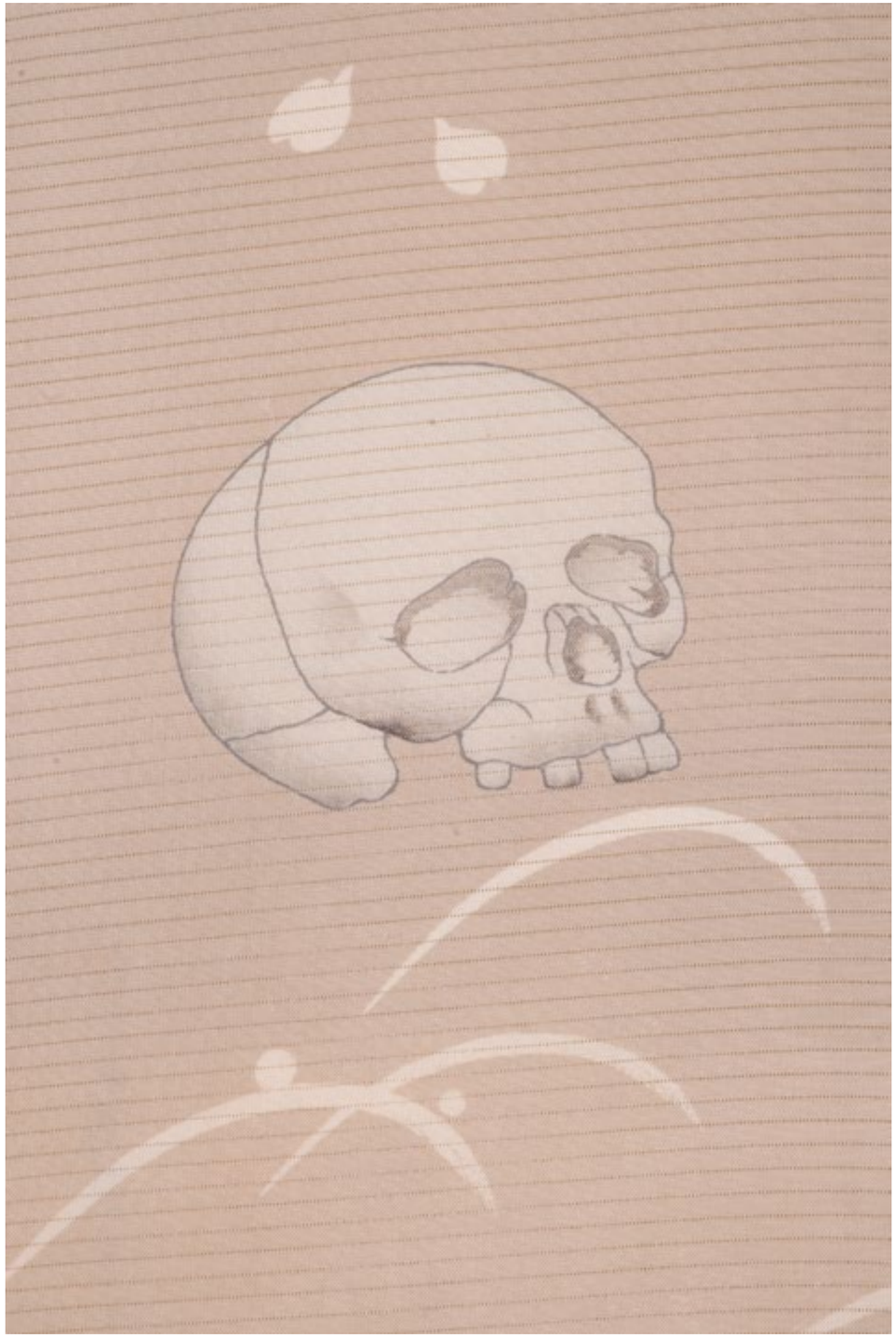
The imagery on this obi is difficult to interpret. The book title—‘sakujika’—gives no clear guidance and it does not translate easily. It may be an abbreviation for ‘sakujikata,’ a government agency in charge of civil engineering projects, or ‘sajikata,’ a master carpenter (both terms more or less outdated today). Another source notes that it refers to a subordinate position for those involved in the construction industry. A Western interpretation might call this a psalm book, with flowers and a candle reflecting church connections. The design may also represent tribute to members of carpentry or construction guilds who had, perhaps, died in the course of their labors, but none of these thoughts provide fully satisfactory explanations of the imagery.

No. 45, Obi or textile length
136" x 12"

The foreground gaikotsu design on this textile shows skeletons arm wrestling, dancing, playing instruments, drinking, and generally having a good time. The background has erotic overtones; the symbols used are known as the shijyu-hatte, a word that originated in the Muromachi period (1336-1573) and referred to the forty-eight winning techniques in sumo wrestling. During the Edo period (1617-1868), however, it became associated with the same number of sexual positions during intercourse. The ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Kunimaro (1793) produced a three-volume "brocade" book of shunga (erotica) prints called *Hanazumo Shijyu Hatte ("Forty-eight 'Flower' Techniques of Sumo Wrestling*," c. 1848). These volumes were, like the skeleton images, both explicit and humorous, although the skeletons still carried the rather macabre reminder of our future state of being.

No. 46, Obi or textile length
146” x 12”

The bleached skull resting amidst the autumn grasses provides a classic motif for the nozarashi style of design representing the view of life as transient and empty. The lightweight fabric is intended for summer wear.



No. 47, Hakama (loose trousers)
26” x 11½” (waist)

This is an unusual garment and shorter than formal hakama would have been. They are made of indigo-dyed cotton and may have been worn for special festivals or as part of a theatrical costume. The skull-and-bone design is typical of the nozarashi style.

No. 48, Textile length for yukata
504” x 52”

Although nozarashi style has been used for this textile, the accompanying conjugal love poetry offers a somewhat more romantic interpretation that lessens the usual emphasis on transience and emptiness. The poetic text, done in the elegant but difficult to read ‘grass’ writing style, may be interpreted as “Let’s get along well together forever!”1 This sentiment is reinforced by the pair of skulls nestled together in the grass.

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1 An alternate and perhaps more elegant reading might be “‘Why not live without any quarrel, we have such a long way to go.” My thanks to John and Kimi Ruddy for this translation, and to Nao Shikama for the one above in the text.

No. 49, Obi
36½" x 6½"

This gaikotsu design follows the usual pattern of skeletons carrying out pleasurable human activities: collecting cherry blossoms for ikebana, dancing and drinking, playing the shamisen, and so forth. Some of the skeletons wear bamboo swords at their side; others sport the traditional large hats that serve to protect the identity of the wearers when they are carrying out illicit liaisons. The written text unfortunately is illegible; the kanji may form part of a verse or words related to the design, although the characters next to the flower carrier may be the name of the artist. The textile seems to be intended for use as an obi, although it seems it would be inappropriate for a funeral or wedding; the sense of parody and satire, however, could make it acceptable for certain events.

No. 50, Textile length
148” x 3½”

This piece of heavy-weight silk decorated with a simple row of tiny repetitive skulls running the length of the textile is representative of the nozarashi style. It was probably intended for use as an obi.

As we are now, so shall you one day be:

Skeleton Motifs in Japanese Kimono

Introduction

For centuries, images of skulls, bones, and skeletons played roles in the religious and popular artistic history of Japan in the form of paintings, scrolls, woodblock prints, books, lacquerware, and even personal accessories such as inrō (a small ornamented container hung from an obi) and netsuke (a carved miniature sculpture that secured the inro cord at the top of the obi). Although images of skulls and bones carried great significance in Buddhism throughout the centuries, and skeletons became a faddish artistic interest in the late Meiji period, prior to the twentieth century few such images were to be seen on clothing, other than in the 19th-century woodblock prints featuring kabuki actors in performance. Artists such as Kunisada, Kuniyoshi, and others gloried in depicting the vibrant costumes that were part of the theatrical experience, and sometimes the costumes worn might carry skull and skeleton imagery that gave substance to the roles the actors were playing. Whether these costumes were true to life or products of artistic license is unclear, but the dramatic garments depicted in these prints may well have served as an indirect influence on textile designers in the early twentieth century, when the skulls and skeletons briefly became fashionable motifs not for the theatre but for kimono, nagajuban (underkimono), haori (jackets worn over kimono), obi, and yukata (an informal kimono) worn by members of the general public.

The two decades in which skeleton imagery gained greatest popular attention as decorative motifs for traditional Japanese garments encompassed the Taishō (1912-1926) and early Shōwa eras (1926-1989), a period lasting roughly from about 1920 to the mid- to 1930s, losing its emphasis as Japan moved closer to total war. This period corresponds to what Miriam Silverberg terms Japan's "modan [modern] years," a time characterized by a post-traditional, cosmopolitan world no longer bound by timeless customs and informed by a sense of open-ended possibilities, new mores, and the mass communications that were shaping the material and popular culture of the nation.[1] The

1 Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (University of California Press, 2009), p. 16.

Japanese media called this a time of "erotic grotesque nonsense," a term that quickly was shortened to *ero-guro-nansensu* as a means of capturing the upbeat and sometimes seemingly giddy tenor of the times.[2] Although the media often hovered between approval and censure, the time of ero-guro-nansensu also carried with it a sense of energy and vitality as the nation moved confidently forward into its brave, new *modan* world.

The general national atmosphere was ideal for creative expansion on many levels, and not least in the arena of textile design, where a new genre was also making itself felt among the buying public. *Omoshirogara*—the term for this new style that translated as 'interesting' or 'amusing' designs—was the Japanese equivalent of Western 'novelty' designs; it showcased all the elements of popular culture new to Japan, most of which had been imported from the West: new styles of music and theatre; the cinema; western-style tea shops and lounges; sports such as baseball, tennis, skiing, and golf; public heroes, airplanes, train, and ocean liners; and, yes, skeletons. Traditional designs—in which can be included the early Buddhist interpretations of skulls and skeletons—were also recast to better fit Japan's new, modern image and more globalized interests.[3] These new motifs fit well into the ero-guro-nansensu tastes of the time, and it was within *omoshirogara* that skeletons finally found their niche.

Development of Skeletal Imagery in Japan

Imagery is often transported intact cross-culturally, but its allusive or allegorical meanings may change radically owing to different cultural and historical contexts. Most of the Japanese textile designs featuring skulls, bones, and skeletons carry minimal or no text, as the symbolism embedded within the images appears to be part of the inherent cultural knowledge that demands little or no explanation. For

2 Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, pp. xv-xvi.

3 The recasting may also have been slightly aided by outside influences such as Walt Disney's widely seen Silly Symphony cartoon "The Skeleton Dance" (1929) and the American Jazz Age song "Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones" (1928). This latter, ironically is a spiritual inspired by the biblical book of Ezekiel where the Prophet visits the "Valley of Dry Bones" and prophesies that all the bones will one day be resurrected at God's command.

appear to frighten or terrify their audience. A whole other genre of monsters, ghosts, goblins, and supernatural spirits serve this latter purpose in Japan, but skeletal imagery often holds a less frightening and even playful, although often moralistic, position. Thus, it is helpful for outsiders to look at the older history of skeletal imagery in Japan in order to understand the design motifs that began to appear in art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as these were the designs that ultimately appeared in the early twentieth-century kimono that form this collection. An understanding of the four major design motifs seen in designs for kimono—*nozarashi*, *sharekobe*, *gaikotsu*, and *Jigoku Dayū*—and their associated metaphors and meanings will help to give insight into and understanding of skeletal imagery as it is presented in Japan. Each of these motifs is explained below.

Nozarashi

As noted earlier, skulls and bones were part of the iconography of Buddhist art in Japan at least as far back as the thirteenth century.[1] They represented death, but only as one of the transition stages from flesh to bone to, ultimately, dust. This show of impermanence and decay was of significant Buddhist doctrinal concern related to meditative practices, illustrated most clearly in *kusozu-e*, paintings and scrolls inspired by Buddhist beliefs that urged meditation on the impurity of the nine stages of a decaying corpse as a way to become liberated from sensual desires,[2] and in *rokudou-e*, paintings of the Six Realms of Existence that depict the fates facing those who do not strive for enlightenment.[3] The skeleton-and-skull imagery appears in both *kusozu-e* and *rokudou-e* in the eighth stage of decay, where all that remains of the body is a bleached skull and a few disarticulated bones scattered among the swaying autumn grasses of a deserted field.

1 Similar iconography is found in even earlier Buddhist texts and artworks from China.

2 Fusae Kanda, "Behind the Sensationalism: Images of a Decaying Corpse in Japanese Buddhist Art," *The Art Bulletin*, College Art Association, Volume LXXXVII, Number 1 (March 2005): 24-48.

3 *Rokudou-e* paintings have strong ties both to the samsaric world that, according to Buddha, is fundamentally unsatisfactory, and to Pure Land Buddhism, but those discussions go beyond the scope of this paper. See, for example, William E. Deal, *Handbook to Life in Medieval and Early Modern Japan* (New York: Facts on File, 2006).

Even within the larger artistic context of decomposition and decay the abandoned skull and bones offered a simple, poignant beauty, and, as the religious imperative gradually gave way to popular tastes over the centuries, this image began to be taken out of context by artists and gradually became the standard iconography of a motif known as *nozarashi*, translated as "bodies exposed in the field." Nozarashi designs initially showed little more than a skull and a few bones resting in a grassy field, thus allowing artists to portray the general concept of death and transience but without its less palatable side effects of the full nine stages. Skulls and autumn grasses appeared on elegant hanging scrolls such as *A Skull Lying in the Weeds*, by the artist Itō Jakuchu (1716-1800),[4] as well as on the costumes worn by kabuki actors. Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889) was one of the very few popular artists who chose to produce a kusozu that showed the full nine stages, but he also used the nozarashi imagery in some of his work. Shinsui Itō (1889-1972), an artist working in the Taishō/early Shōwa years, produced a work showing Ono no Komachi, the legendary poetess of the Heian era (794-1185), sitting atop a large skull in a field of waving grass; she holds a *sotoba* (a Buddhist memorial or grave marker commonly included in nozarashi designs—see page 12) and presumably is contemplating her own mortality. This image, contemporary with many of the kimono in this collection, could also have served to inspire the textile designers of the time to include nozarashi motifs in their work.

Textile designers would have been quite aware of the Buddhist nine stages of decay, but none chose to depict any other than the eighth stage as represented by nozarashi. Some added a moon in a cloudy sky to their designs, perhaps as a reference to the concept of Buddhist enlightenment but more probably as a means to heighten the sense of melancholy that would have appealed to the emotional sensibilities of the time (page 96). Other designers chose to give a lighter touch to the transient nature of life as expressed in the nozarashi designs by adding skeletons happily wandering through a field (page 132) or staging a serenade and dance among the autumn grasses (page 40).

Sharekobe

4 Itō Jakuchu, *A Skull Lying in the Weeds*, 1794; owned by Saifuku-ji, Osaka Prefecture, in Alfreda Murck and Wen Fong, eds., *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting* (NewYork: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), p. 375-76.

my body to the heart," by the famous poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694).[1] Artwork such as this seemed to inspire textile artists to find images of a skull—or skulls—and poetry complementary pairings. The skulls might be accompanied by rows of *hanko* (name seals) of famous poets and other literary and artistic luminaries (page 14) or by blocks of poetry (page 26), forming interesting design graphics. Skull designs, when used singly or in multiples, are called *sharekoube,* which means simply 'skull.' When paired with text, the skulls can present a design appealing to an intellectual, or, when lined up in repetitive grinning rows, a comic (although some might say macabre) front.

Gaikotsu

Perhaps the most prolific of the skeletal designs found on Taishō/early Shōwa kimono are the articulated skeletons drawn to mimic and parody the lifestyle of their human counterparts, but these lively skeletons had rarely appeared in Japanese art—much less on garments—in earlier centuries.[2] It was not until the eighteenth century that the artistic possibilities of full-skeleton depictions really began to awaken in Japan. In large part, this was brought about by a 1734 Dutch translation of a 1722 German anatomical text that was then translated into Japanese by several men with medical backgrounds who were.[3] The 1774 publication of *Kaitai Shinsho* ("New Book of Anatomy"), complete with copies of the Dutch images of the human bodies stripped layer by layer to the bone, was unlike any anatomical text ever seen before in Japan. Most of the extant anatomical books were based on Chinese texts, and few explored the body beneath the skin.

The enthusiasm in Japan for this work went far beyond the medical community for whom it was intended. The late eighteenth century was a time in which Japanese artists were beginning to study and imitate Western techniques of representation of bodies, and *Kaitai Shinsho* presented them with a new visual style as well as a new style of perceiving the world.[4] In the West, where anatomy developed as an academic discipline for understanding life, the skeleton and the naked body stripped of skin were both depicted in lifelike poses. In the Japanese anatomical drawings, which were based on cadaver dissections, the more realistic the depiction, the more death was emphasized, in keeping with the Buddhist view of the body/skeleton as a symbol of death.[5] As artists began to prefer the Western anatomical drawings for their work--judging that those skeletons represented life more than death--they also began to endow the skeletons with personality (they were, after all, human once). As Dōshin Satō notes, the fact that artists sensed more life in the *Kaitai Shinsho* skeletons than in the bodies accompanying the traditional Japanese anatomical drawings provides interesting possibilities for conjecture about the Japanese view of life, death, and the human body.[6]

Thus, by the late eighteenth century 'new' skeleton images began to appear in paintings. One of the early 'first responders' was Maruyama Okyo, already an established and admired artist, commissioned in 1787 to produce a work for Kameisan Daijōji, a Shingon temple. The result was *Hajō hakkotsu zazen zu* ("Skeleton Performing *Zazen* Above the Waves," 1787), intended for use for private contemplation and meditation on special occasions at the temple.[7] This was also the period when woodblock print artists such as those noted earlier also incorporated more 'lifelike' skeleton imagery into their work. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, several artists had become known

1 David Landis Barnhill, *Basho's Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Basho* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 1.

2 One exception is a little-known work by Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481), an eccentric Zen Buddhist monk and poet who had a great impact on the infusion of Zen attitudes and ideals into Japanese art and literature. His book, Ikkyū Gaikotsu (written in 1457; 1692 ed.) shows a surprisingly lively and well-articulated group of skeletons carrying out a range of worldly chores. The skeleton illustrations are imaginative and humorous, but at the same time allegorical and didactic, intended as a meditative and teaching tool. It did not seem to start a fad at the time for lifelike skeletons in art. The booklet is viewed as a prose poem on the theme of life, death, and transience.

3 The Anatomische Tabellen by Johann Adam Kulmus (1689-1745) was the German text. The Japanese who translated the Dutch text knew no Dutch and so learned the language as they worked on the book, a process that took two years.

4 Shigehisa Kuriyama, "Between Mind and Eye: Japanese Anatomy in the Eighteenth Century," in Charles Leslie and Allan Young, *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 21-43.

5 Dōshin Satō, Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State: The Politics of Beauty (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, English edition 2011), p. 268.

6 Satō, Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State, p. 268.

7 Beatrice B. Shoemaker argues that "Performing Zazen" is misleading. She references the Head Priest of the temple, who notes that the skeleton embodies the essence of the enlightened being who has literally shed all fleshly desires through long meditative practices. See "Ōkyo's *'Skeleton,'* Not Performing *Zazen*; Reflections on the Iconography of the Daijoji's *kyakuden*," page 5. Find at: www.academia.edu/10132421/Ōkyo_s_Skeleton_Not_Performing_Zazen_Reflections_on_the_Iconography_of_the_Daijōji_s_kyakuden

in all the imaginable activities of everyday life, from play to work to eating, drinking, gaming—and even painting.[1] His figures were lively, playful, and anatomically natural in their movements. Some also conveyed a sense of subtle eroticism, which may have influenced their popularity. These works probably had more influence on the textile designs with skeleton imagery (called *gaikotsu*, or 'skeleton figures') than any other artist who produced imagery in this area, and many of the *gaikotsu* designs that appear in this collection are based on Kyosai's very life-like skeletons. Some are almost identical copies of Kyosai's work, done in his same drawing style and carrying out the same activities as his skeletons (pages 72 and 88). Other designs capture the spirit of Kyosai's dynamic depictions and, although they may be drawn in a simpler style, still pursue skeleton pleasures, whether gaming, drinking, dancing, making music, and picnicking (pages 22 and 84). Kyosai also produced a drawing book, *Gyosai Gadan* (1887), in which he included several realistic anatomy drawings showing the outer human body as well as its skeletal structure, intending it as a teaching tool for young artists. Kyosai's work was widely known and popular into the twentieth century. It probably had more influence on the gaikotsu textile designs of the 1920s and 1930s than any other artist who produced imagery in this area.

Jigoku Dayū

Not all Kiyosai's skeleton work was comical, however, and death was the underlying theme in some of his prints and paintings. These works featured beautiful women being accosted by skeletons (sometimes even in top hats) intent on seducing them. One such painting even includes skeletons carrying a banner with the words "Death is waiting for you." He also produced prints and paintings featuring a beautiful semi-historical courtesan known as Jigoku Dayū (the 'Hell Courtesan'), so named because she wore always wore kimono spectacularly decorated with an image of Enma, the King of Hell, and scenes from the Buddhist concept of hell. Jigoku Dayū is celebrated for an alleged encounter with the eccentric Zen Buddhist priest Ikkyū (1394–1481) who carried a staff topped with a skull as a reminder of life's impermanence.

1 Some of Kyosai's best known manga are the *Kyosai Manga* (1881) and the *Kyosai Donga* (also 1881). His manga work is often compared to that of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), whose humorous depictions of people no doubt influenced Kyosai's talent for whimsy and caricature.

According to a history book published in 1668, Ikkyū was said to have exchanged poems with Jigoku Dayū, which lead to her enlightenment. A later, well-embellished (and apocryphal) version of the story (1809) has Jigoku Dayū observing Ikkyū dancing with skeletons, but when she entered the room, all the people in the room appeared in their normal state. After seeing that astonishing scene, however, she understood the impermanence and transience of life and death and thus reached enlightenment. This version of the Ikkyū-Jigoku Dayū encounter was immensely popular in the nineteenth century and inspired numerous paintings and prints of their meeting, as well as a kabuki play. Kyosai's depictions of the encounter always included Jigoku Dayū and one or more skeletons, but not always Ikkyū.

The Jigoku Dayū story and the many works related to it also inspired elements of the tale to be reflected in textile design, sometimes figuratively and sometimes symbolically or allegorically. A contemplative nagajuban design (page 56) refers to the meeting of Ikkyū and Jigoku Dayū metaphorically, as does a nagajuban (page 28). Images based on Ikkyū's dancing skeletons and other skeleton figures depicted in the Jigoku Dayū prints by other artists have also been used as the basis for textile designs for kimono. The ferocious King of Hell and his minions minding the fires of hell—Jigoku Dayu's preferred motifs for her garments (at least as artists portrayed her)—also show up in some designs in the collection (pages 44 and 62, for example).

Skeletons and Kimono in the Twentieth Century

The four major designs found in the skeletal designs for kimono in the twentieth century—nozarasi, sharekobe, gaikotsu, and Jigoku Dayū—clearly have rather firm artistic groundings of great age, with elements picked from Buddhism, the revelatory anatomy texts brought to Japan by the Dutch, and artists such as Ōkyo, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi, Kyosai, and others who incorporated these motifs into their work in ways that drew great popular appeal. While this historical background helps to elucidate the meanings behind the skeletal imagery and its changes over time, what is a little harder to understand is the sudden desire that took hold of a segment of the Japanese population to wear garments with skulls and skeletons.

Japan's move into modernity following the Meiji Restoration and the new

interests that many wanted to sample—and fashion was one arena offering opportunities for innovation in personal tastes. Western clothing, although not worn universally, had certainly taken hold in urban areas by the early twentieth century, but that is not where the skeleton motifs are found. Rather, they appear only on traditional Japanese garments, and almost exclusively on men's garments. By the 1920s, most urban Japanese men with jobs of any standing wore Western clothing for work, but switched to traditional clothing such as *nagajuban* or *yukata* at home (pages 14 and 20, for example). They also might wear traditional clothing when attending special entertainments in the evening, when a *haori* (pages 26 and 40) would also be worn. Men's traditional kimono were usually dark and undecorated outside, but imagination was let loose with innovative designs on their *nagajuban*, or on the interior lining (*haura*) of a *haori*—images that were rarely seen in public.[1] They were something to be enjoyed as entertainment among a small circle of friends at intimate parties in private rooms where a playful atmosphere prevailed, sometimes with geisha in attendance.[2] The ritual of taking off one's *haori* or outer kimono to show off the wonderful hidden designs to the select few present was a kind of voluptuary event. Japanese bourgeoisie considered this kind of exclusive leisure activity very chic, or *iki*.[3] The designs were often unusual and could be quite stunning; they always carefully chosen and sometimes specially commissioned (pages 100 and 132). Skulls and skeletons, with their hint of eroticism, would have been ideal subjects for such designs. The popularity of nozarashi motifs were unlikely to be favored for religious reasons but more probably can be seen as a mocking challenge to the concept of one's own mortality.

Only occasionally are women's kimono or obi with skeleton motifs found, and those that have such images were most likely ordered by women in the entertainment industry or the rakish world of the demi-monde where shocking or out of the ordinary designs would be most appreciated (see pages 94 and 108, for example). It would also be extremely unusual to find a Japanese child's kimono with such motifs, as the centuries-old connections of skeletal motifs with death would undoubtedly be too close for parents to risk wrapping their child in such imagery. In contrast, novelty designs of playful skeletons cavorting on the pajamas or casual clothing (not costumes) that Western children might wear around Halloween appear as amusing rather than prophetic.

As Japan moved through the 1930s, away from the exuberance of Taishō and into the years when war was taking on an ever-increasing presence, cavorting and playful skeletons gave way to images on kimono of territorial expansion, warplanes, and boy soldiers. Perhaps the implicit threat of the transience of life was, at the time, becoming all too real to wish to wrap one's self in its imagery. Although the fad for skeleton iconography on traditional clothing did not prove to be long-lasting, this impressive collection of skeletal imagery on cloth gives us an opportunity for a small taste of the invigorating years of ero-guro-nansensu and the imagination of the textile artists who added a vibrant sense of the amusing—as well as the macabre—to those years.

-Jacqueline Marx Atkins

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1 Such concealed designs were part of the history of Japan, a holdover from Edo sumptuary laws that limited public displays of wealth or luxury. Although the laws were abolished during the Meiji era, these "hidden treasures" became fashion statements in themselves and continued to be worn in the old way.

2 Hiroshi Kashiwagi, "Design and War," in Jacqueline Marx Atkins, ed., *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 178.

3 Kashiwagi, "Design and War," p. 178.

Collection Summary

This unparalleled collection brings together fifty-three extraordinary kimono that speak to a little-known but deeply evocative current in Japanese textile history. With motifs ranging from full skeletons and solitary skulls to demons, ghouls and moonlit scenes, these garments explore death, the supernatural, and impermanence with striking visual poetry. Technically accomplished and culturally layered, many are executed in masterful combinations of yūzen and katazome dyeing, embroidery, and hand-painting on fine silk crepe. Whether viewed as historical artifacts, works of art, or philosophical meditations on life and death, these kimono are exceptional in their rarity and resonance. As a cohesive group, they offer a singular opportunity for acquisition—by private collectors, public institutions, or museums—to preserve and share a haunting, beautiful, and largely undocumented expression of modern Japanese visual culture.