A Japanese kimono is one of the most highly valued types of traditional dress in the world. It is not only appreciated because of the actual cost, but more because of the design elements used to create high quality kimono.

The shape and cut of a kimono is basically the same for all styles, but the uniqueness of each comes from the differing materials, colours, designs and techniques used to decorate it.

The three main techniques defining the value of a kimono are: embroidery, shibori (tie-dyeing) and yuzen dyeing. If all three are found (and it has a good pattern), a kimono is considered to be of high quality.

Focusing on one design element in this article—embroidery—we will look at the technical side and a bit of history and general appreciation. As well as traditional embroidery we also find sashiko, which is stitching rather than embroidery. Sashiko is found on more day-to-day textiles. To round out the embroidery picture, a short paragraph on sashiko is appended.

Traditional Japanese embroidery has many followers, in- and outside Japan. Nihon Shishu, the name for traditional Japanese embroidery, is studied and valued all over the world. Nihon Shishu is used on kimono and on all kinds of other textile-based articles used in daily life, from bags to fukusa (presentation wrappers) (see fig. 1), and wall decorations to bedspreads. To understand the intricacy of Japanese embroidery we look at the actual technique as studied in the worldwide organization Kurenai-kai.

First a bit of history

Although it was little known outside Japan until about 25 years ago, traditional Japanese embroidery has been an integral part of Japan's culture for a millennium. It came to Japan from China through Korea by the route known as the Silk Road 1600 years ago.

With the introduction of Buddhism came the import of religious images, many embroidered. Typical Japanese embroidery developed from China's Sui and Tang dynasty embroidery. Fragments of Japanese embroidery exist that date back to 622, the 30th year of Empress Suiko's reign. The Shosoin (built in 756) collection of textiles has pieces which were embroidered using untwisted thread embroidered in the sashi-nui style (long and short stitches).

During the Kamakura period (1185-1333) interest in embroidery increased, as it was used by commoners for religious images.
Embroidery for a long time was a most popular way to decorate garments, apart from the woven designs already used.

It was particularly popular during the Muromachi era (1392-1568), when simple embroidery techniques were used to decorate cloth. *Bugaku* (a classic dance form) costumes survive from this period showing elaborate embroidery mostly done in *wataoshi-nui* (float stitch with no running thread on the reverse side of the cloth).

During the Momoyama era (1568-1600), embroidery covered garments completely, a style still seen in current *Nò* costumes. Also *surihaku* (use of metallic leaf on cloth) came into fashion. It also featured embroidery using relatively large motifs, using long parallel stitches, known as *ura-nuki*.

Until the Meiji era (1868-1912), embroidery in Japan was known as *nui*, which literally means 'sewing'. The word *shishū* came into fashion when Western embroidery skills came in. The Japanese style was from then on known as Nihon Shishū.

**Edo era embroidery**

The Edo period (1600-1868) saw many different attitudes towards embroidery. Under the feudal system, a distinct division of classes (and clothing) was established, which resulted, amongst other things, in a 1683 ban by the Shōgun on the wearing of luxuriously embroidered kimono by the lower classes.

During the Keichō (1596-1615) and Kan'ei (1624-1644) periods, preferences changed to minute designs with short sparse stitches, e.g. to create tiny landscapes of flowers and autumn grasses.

During the Manji (1658-1661) and Kanbun (1661-1673) eras, embroidery became more dense and precise with increasingly realistic detail, foreshadowing the later mature Edo period.

The Kyōhō era (1716-1736) saw increased use of embroidery as the sole means of decoration. In that period *su-nui* developed, based on ink drawing. It was characterised by fine lines, limited colour range and monochrome ground.

In the 19th c., many techniques were used, and from ca. 1850 embroidery was combined with other techniques, e.g. on *katabira kosode*. Kosode was the term used for kimono before the late 1800s. The kosode (fig. 5) is the predecessor of the current kimono, and developed from the underkimono of earlier times. A *katabira* is an unlined summer kosode, which used stencilled designs with embroidered accents including *kin koma* (couching metallic thread).

In the Meiji era (1868-1912) subdued designs were favoured. Touches of embroidery were used to accent and highlight objects within simple scenery (fig. 7).

From 1850-1915, *uchikake* (house coats, used as over-garment and later as wedding kimono) were often wholly embroidered with auspicious designs.

The Taishō era (1912-1926) saw the return of heavier designs, mostly combined with *yūzen* and hand-painting. Machine embroidery allowed for heavier designs and compacted embroidery.

Currently many painted designs are highlighted with embroidery especially on more formal kimono like *tomesode* (the most formal kimono for married women, with crests at the back, front and shoulders and designs

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**fig. 2** Hakoseko (hand-embroidered purse that is tucked between *obi* and *kimono*), *Shōwa* period (1950s)

**fig. 3** Mon (crest) of contemporary furisode (long-sleeved kimono)

**fig. 4** Mon of kabuki kimono (long-sleeved kimono), female part, *Shōwa* period (1970s)
Hand-embroidered kosode kimono, Edo era (1850s) on the lower half of the garment. Kuro or black-tomesode are very formal like Western black-dresses while iro or coloured tomesode indicate the base garment colour (figs. 6, 8 & 11). Heavy embroidered designs are found on wedding furisode (long sleeved, most formal kimono for unmarried young women) and uchikake.

**Gold and silver leaf and thread**

Gold leaf and the preceding gold thread has been used for centuries. Initially it was applied directly to the cloth. Over the years distinctive styles of applying metal leaf, and later on metal thread, were developed.

One of the styles that emerged is nuihaku—lit. sewing and metallic leaf. The kosode was decorated with embroidery and applied metallic leaf, initially for high society women, now used for No robes which are known by the same name. This style employed symmetry and repetition to copy the design style of woven materials of the late 16th c. and replaced it.

During the Edo period nuihaku used a wider variety of design elements like asymmetric composition and more haku, metallic leaf.

During the Muromachi period (1392-1568) through the 1st decade of the 17th century, a special type of design flourished—tsujigahana. It combined shibori (Japanese tie-dyeing), kaki-e (painting), surihaku (metallic leaf) and nui (embroidery).

In surihaku, metallic leaf was applied to painted sections within the design but this was largely replaced by kin-koma by the Kanbun era (1661-1673).

Single embroidery stitches highlight cones of pine branches.
Modern wedding kimono have added gold or silver with a new style of surihaku and kin-koma (fig. 12). Appliqué in combination with kin-koma is also found (fig. 10).

**Beni**

Yûzen dyeing, paste resist dyeing with dye applied using a brush, developed in the late 1600s-early 1700s, becoming the favoured way of decorating kimono, but embroidery was still not forgotten.

The colour beni, a pinky red made from safflower petals, was the favourite Edo era colour: warm and luminous with yellow undertones, and gold was embroidered on yûzen dyed garments to compensate for the yûzen red, which was too cold, too clear with blue undertones, and did not match sensitive Edo era tastes.
Introduction to West

After having been refined and perfected over so many centuries, traditional Japanese embroidery has become a style in its own right. Themes from earlier periods of Japanese history and colour schemes all have their own special meanings.

With kimono, as with other elements in Japanese life, designs and colours are chosen to fit the season and wearer's age. Designs usually symbolize traditional themes, legends and scenes from classical Japanese literature, like The Tales of Genji.

Until 1980, when Nihon Shishū pieces were exhibited at the national seminar of the Embroiderers' Guild of America, Inc. in Dallas, Texas, its embroidery was hardly known outside Japan. Now it shines as a paramount achievement in the world of textile art.

Kurenai-kai

The Japanese Embroidery Center (JEC), Kurenai-kai, was founded in 1989 at Dunwoody Georgia, USA and is headed by Tamura Shūji.

The JEC is a non-profit educational organisation which aims to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Japanese embroidery by pursuing Nui-dō, the Way of Embroidery.
Traditional Japanese embroidery; basic concepts as defined by Kurenai-kai

Traditional Japanese embroidery is worked with silk and metal threads, almost always on a silk ground. The fabric is mounted on a frame whose design has lasted over a millennium. It is held drum-tight so tension can be kept on the threads to enhance the shine.

Reeled filament silk is used flat, or twisted by hand to a variety of sizes and degrees of twist. The metals are gold or silver in several sizes, twisted around a silk (thread) core and held in place on the work by couching with fine silk thread.

Japanese embroidery fabrics

One fabric used is habutae silk—a soft, lightweight plain-weave silk like taffeta. This silk has a slightly ribbed surface giving a lustrous effect. It also is used for formal men’s kimono and haori jackets, and tomesode. Customarily used for kimono linings, it is very thin.

The jūni-hitoe, 12-fold court costume of the Heian period (794-1185), was made from it. Fine with a smooth surface, it is easy to stitch, but for that same reason is not suitable for heavy designs.

Many different silk fabrics are suitable for the kimono itself. These are heavier than habutae but not as thick as obi fabric. They may have various woven patterns and the surface may be smooth or textured. Crepe is used for the kuro (black)-tomesode, the most formal kimono for married women. Crepe has a distinct weft valley, making it suitable for fuzzy effects.

Mon-muji fabric is used for informal obi. Relatively light, it can be dyed after weaving. The surface is slightly textured and is suitable for applying gold leaf.

Shioze fabric has a distinct weft rib. It is also used for informal obi and can be dyed after weaving or have gold leaf applied. However, gold leaf is seldom used for shioze, as the fabric is considered casual.

Shusu is a satin-faced fabric used for informal obi, pocketbooks and belts. The thread must be dyed before being woven.

Nishijin fabric is often used for formal obi. The surface of this fabric is smoother than shioze, so is suitable for realistic effects. In Japan it is also used for pictures. The most formal obi fabric is gold or silver Nishijin, woven with a silk warp and weft of silk and metallic leaf on paper. Its thickness makes it suitable for heavy designs.

The stiffest obi fabric is tsuzure. The weft threads are round and metallic, rendering the fabric quite stiff. It is considered suitable for the heaviest designs. Leather

fig. 16 Detail of kabuki kimono for male role, Shōwa period
Hand-embroidered on separate piece of cloth and sewn as a whole onto kimono.
thimbles, instead of European metal or ceramic ones, are used when embroidering this fabric, because of its extreme density.

These fabrics are made of silk, or silk and metallic threads. Occasionally m or linen fabric is used for summer costumes. The open weave of the m or the linen’s coolness makes it suitable for warmer seasons.

Japanese flat silk

It appears that Prince Koma-Ô, a renegade subject of the Chinese Emperor Chuai, first brought silkworm eggs to Japan about 195 AD. He is said to have introduced tea, Buddhism and sericulture (silkworm-rearing).

It took several hundred years, before the Japanese could create the quality of woven fabric made in China, which had been guarding knowledge of sericulture from foreigners for centuries, but the Japanese finally managed to unravel its secrets. The best silk was imported mainly from China, until by the late 17th century most silk was produced domestically in northern Japan and the Kantô region around Edo.

Although more recently silk has proven a versatile natural fibre from which to make various products, weavers and embroiderers were the first transfixed by the beauty of the silkworms’ creation.

Each cocoon consists of an approximately one-mile long filament, which is slightly elastic and varies in quality along its length. The silk filament is an extruded protein, unlike the animal fibres wool, mohair, cashmere, or human hair, which are all growing cellular fibres.

Through a microscope, silk looks like a rounded, triangular glass rod, while the growing cellular animal fibres have overlapping scales. The shape and pearly sheen of the silk filament is used to produce ‘reeled’ silk.

The remaining coarser, weaker sections and some from broken or imperfect cocoons, or ‘waste’ silk, are used to make ‘spun’ silk. These pieces are carded, combed, and spun into a thread.
fig. 19 Detail of uchikake, early Heisei era (1990s),
kin-koma and machine embroidery

The superior reeled filaments are stronger than spun silk. They produce the finest silk fabrics and 'flat' silk, the thread that stitches traditional Japanese embroidery.

During the soaking and reeling process, filaments from five to eight cocoons are plied together, since the filament from a single cocoon is too fine to be handled alone. The reeled silk is then rewound into skeins, loose coiled bundles.

Japanese flat silk is wound to a thickness of about sixteen ply, depending on the weight. Silk has always been sold by weight. It takes about three thousand cocoons to produce one pound of silk thread, enough for one kimono.

Japanese gold and silver thread

Real Japanese gold or silver thread is made by hand. Real gold or silver are pounded into an incredibly thin leaf, which is then glued onto paper. This is then cut into fine strips, which are wound spirally around a thread core. While this process was originally done by hand, very high-quality imitation threads are now machine made.

Normally gold or silver thread is couched, sewn onto the ground with another silk thread. The most usual couching thread for Japanese gold is a red-orange or sometimes gold silk.

Red couching thread adds lustre to the gold, whereas gold tends to cool it. Of course, other couching threads can be made of any coloured flat silk, to obtain an infinite range of effects.

Japanese silver is generally couched with white silk, but, again, other colours may be used to different ends.

Not only is the gold or silver thread affected by the couching threads' colour, but padding may influence the final look. Cotton padding thread is the usual choice under Japanese gold threads. Often a layer of gold flat silk is worked over the padding to lessen the chance of the white showing through. Orange silk padding threads can give additional life to Japanese gold.

Padding shows through the gold more than one realises, and the colour used will become part of the reflection created by the metal.

Types of stitches

Kyoto Shoin's Art Library of Japanese Textiles describes the following stitches used in Nihon Shishū:

1. Kaeshi-nui or outline stitch (fig. 21)
A simple stitch that slants backwards. A line is formed by repeating the stitch back and forth.

2. Tsugihari-nui or two-way stitch (fig. 22)

fig. 20 Kin-koma design on sleeve of kabuki kimono
for male roles

fig. 21 Kaeshi-nui or outline stitch
fig. 22 Tsugihari-nui or two-way stitch
fig. 23 Kusariguma or chain stitch
By repeating the simple running stitch on the same line, but in the opposite direction, a solid line is formed.

3. Kusari-nui or chain stitch (fig. 23)
An embroidery stitch which forms connecting links like a chain. This stitch is used to make lines and fill space.

4. Sagara-nui or French nut stitch (fig. 24)
An embroidery stitch which forms dots. The thread is stitched from the underside of the cloth and knotted on the outer side. This procedure is repeated to express dotted patterns.

5. Sashi-nui or long-and-short stitch (fig. 25)
Alternating long-and-short stitches used to fill in parts of a design. All stitches go in the same direction. When used effectively for shading, the design appears realistic.

6. Hira-nui or satin stitch (fig. 26)
Close parallel stitches fill out a design. Every caution is made to prevent the stitches overlapping. Because the thread "floats" on the surface of the cloth, tome-nui, a fixing stitch, is often used to secure it.

7. Watashi-nui or float stitch (fig. 27)
This is a variation of hira-nui. Stitches go back and forth, from one edge of the design to the other without the thread appearing on the underside of the cloth. Used in the 14-16th c.

8. Tome-nui or fixing stitch (fig. 28)
This stitch is used to secure the "floating" thread of the hira-nui and watashi-nui stitches. It means that thread of another colour or material is combined with the underlying floating thread to keep this floating thread in its place and create geometric patterns like hemp leaves and lozenges or figurative designs like petals, stamens and leaf veins.

9. Matsuri-nui, a variation on kaeshi-nui outline stitch (fig. 29)
Used to form a line.

10. Koma-nui or cording stitch (fig. 30)
An embroidery technique to secure gold or thick twisted thread, which cannot penetrate cloth. The thread from a koma reel is unwound and laid along the under-drawing line, then stay-stitched onto the cloth with thin silk thread.
Sashiko embroidery

The term sashiko comes from sasu, to pierce. It consists of a simple running stitch that decorates a single layer or stitches together multiple layers of cloth. Initially this kind of stitching was probably for recycling or extending the cloth’s life. Layers were obviously added to make thicker, warmer and more durable clothes.

Sashiko stitching has been known at least since the 8th C., judging from a robe in the Shōsōin collection (AD 756). Sashiko is not only found on country clothing, but also on firemen’s clothing to combine layers of protective cloth and decoration.

Sashiko typically is white cotton thread on fabric dyed with indigo or ai (giving many shades of blue). Double or single strands are used. The length of the stitch depends on the number of layers stitched together. Generally they are straight and even.

Sashiko either forms one repeating pattern or combines several patterns. Most notable sashiko styles arose in Tōhoku, N-E Japan.

Closure

The advantage of embroidery over woven designs is flexibility, limited only by the colours of silk available. Both woven and embroidered kimono share the flexibility and freedom of painting and yuzen dyeing, but embroidery makes the designs three-dimensional. Even when painting methods advanced, embroidered colours were preferred over paints.

Embroidery adds a feeling of warmth, volume and depth to designs on a flat surface. This can either be on a ground that already has relief or a smooth ground to create extra relief. Touches of embroidery added to a delicate scenery design, as on Meiji-era kimono, or fully-blown embroidered designs from the Momoyama-era, both have their own charm.

Because of hand-embroidery’s high cost, machining has become the main way of embroidering kimono. The silk thread used is fine, unlike the flat silk used when hand-embroidering. Generally it is more compact and so much heavier than hand-embroidery; a result is that the ground now mainly will be mixed materials, i.e. silk and synthetics, to give the material enough strength to support the heavy embroidery.

Contemporary wedding furisode and uchikake have heavily embroidered designs, which now are machined on.

Any type of embroidery adds life and dimension to a design and many machine-embroidered kimono will have great impact on the person that encounters embroidered kimono, especially for the first time.

There can be, however, no comparison with hand-embroidered kimono—they do have a life of their own! Unfortunately hand-embroidered kimono are expensive nowadays.

During my continuing searches and digging, I do hope to come across an affordable hand-embroidered uchikake, of the Edo or Meiji periods, to add to my collection. As any collector will very likely understand, you can never have enough of the item that you collect!
fig. 32 Machine-embroidered uchikake, 1990s

Sources
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