c. 1958

Silk crepe with yuzen dyeing

64 x 50 inches (162.6 x 127 cm)

Japanese

Gift of Mrs. Iwao Setsu, 1995, 1995-106-2

LET'S LOOK

What kind of clothing is this? Where are the sleeves? How would it look different if someone were wearing it?

What kind of tree is shown in the decoration? What season? How can you tell?

Is the tree symmetrical? Why? How is the design balanced?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Make a list of all the colors in the kimono. What colors are soft and muted? Bold and bright? What could they express?

Was this kimono made by machine or by hand? What crafts were involved?

Who do you think would wear it? Why? When?

WOMAN'S KIMONO

This is a Japanese kimono, a T-shaped style of clothing that is worn wrapped across the front like a jacket. The body and wide sleeves are made of modular parts that are sewn together. They form a large, flat surface that can be decorated with images or designs. This photograph shows the back of the kimono, with the sleeves stretched out to form the top of the T. The front panels have been folded back to show the flowering plum tree design, which wraps around from the back to the front. A gallery director in Tokyo named Iwao Setsu gave this kimono—which was designed and commissioned by her father in 1958—to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1995.

Let your eyes move through the forms on this kimono, starting at the bottom where clusters of creamy blossoms are brilliant against the dark background and overlap the mottled gray-and-green tree trunk. As your eyes move up, the dark, lower area gradually lightens into soft beige. The tree trunk leans to the left and bends diagonally up to the right through empty space. At the top, clusters of pink, red, and maroon blossoms spill over the right shoulder. Dark areas gradually fade up into light and are repeated in the lower portions of the wide sleeves. The contrasts of dark with light, muted and bright colors, and patterns with empty space dramatically express both the fragility and strength of nature.

Every aspect of this kimono was hand-crafted: the silk was handwoven and the pieces were cut and sewn by hand. The flowering plum design was also created by hand using an intricate technique called *yuzen* dyeing, which was invented in Kyoto during the seventeenth century and named for the fan-maker Yuzensai Miyazaki. In this process, first the design is sketched onto the silk, then a special rice paste is applied along the outline of the design

using a paper cone or a brush. This paste serves as a resist, which temporarily protects certain areas from absorbing color from dye and pigments. The designs are then painted directly on the silk using dyes. Once the dyes are set, the rice paste is washed away in hot water, leaving thin lines separating the different parts of the design. You can see these lines along the tree trunk and between the plum blossom petals.

The flowering plum tree has signaled the coming of spring in China, Korea, and Japan for thousands of years because its blossoms peek out through the winter snow. The Japanese use white and red plum blossoms in New Year's decorations because they think they are auspicious (favorable or lucky). The design of the flowering plum tree on this kimono is based on a pair of large screen paintings made around 1700 by a famous Japanese artist named Ogata Kōrin. In this design the plum tree is asymmetrical (not the same on the right and left sides), like real trees, and also creates feelings of balance and movement.

ABOUT THE JAPANESE KIMONO

The word "kimono" was invented in the Meiji period (1868–1912) when Westerners asked the Japanese to name their traditional style of dress. The word comes from the Japanese *kiru* (to wear) and *mono* (a thing or things). The history of this kind of garment goes back to the eighth century, when the Japanese emperor required that all robes worn at the Imperial Court overlap in the front from right to left. This strict dress code reflected the style of the mighty Tang dynasty in China (618–907), which had enormous influence on countries throughout Asia. Japan's own distinctive culture flourished during the Heian period (794–1185). Aristocratic women at Court had elaborate outfits consisting of many layers of unlined silk robes with large, broad sleeves. As many as 25 layers of silk in different colors peeked out at the neck, hem, and sleeve edges! Both men and women wore particular colors and color combinations to express their status and to communicate secret messages and feelings. Common people wore simple robes with small sleeves that were like short versions of present-day kimonos.

Clothing styles for people in power changed when warrior clans took control of Japan from the Kamakura period through the Muromachi period (1185–1573). Men wore ankle-length robes that crossed over the chest and had broad sleeves. Instead of the elaborate outfits of the Heian period, women wore *kosode*, long white robes (with small sleeves) that trailed on the floor under two outer robes. During the Edo period (1615–1868) Japan returned to a unified government, with Edo

(present-day Tokyo) as the capital. Women invented flamboyant ways of wearing *kosode*, by tying *obi*, or sashes, in various ways. Stiff, T-shaped robes made of thick, rich brocades (silk with raised gold or silver patterns) were created for traditional Nō theater, which was enjoyed by the ruling class. As merchants and property owners started to display their wealth by wearing fancy kimonos, the government passed laws limiting the use of certain colors and patterns to maintain the status of the ruling class. In the late 1800s kimono styles were depicted in prints that were admired by the Impressionist painters in the U.S. and Europe. Kimonos with long sleeves called *furisode* also appeared and yuzen dyeing techniques made possible dynamic designs like the one on this kimono.

Western notions of the kimono came from *kosode*, *furisode*, and robes from Nō theater and *Kabuki* theater—popular entertainment attended by the common people. When Japan began to trade with the west again in the mid-nineteenth century, the country struggled to maintain its national identity while undergoing Western-style modernization. Kimonos came to symbolize the essence of Japanese tradition, especially Japanese femininity—even though kimonos have been worn in Japan by both sexes (and all classes and ages) until recently. Today, most Japanese wear clothes like those of Americans and Europeans. However, for traditional events such as the tea ceremony or flower viewing, or formal occasions such as weddings and graduations, men wear conservative kimono styles and women wear kimonos decorated with colorful patterns.

Dress
c. 1963
Wool knit
Center Back Length: 34 inches (86.4 cm)
RUDI GERNREICH
American (born Vienna)

Gift of Miriam Mednick Rothman,
1990, 1990-97-1

THE KIMONO EFFECT

This wool-knit dress, designed by the famous American fashion designer Rudi Gernreich in the 1960s, was inspired by Japanese kimono design. It wraps loosely across the chest like a kimono and has a built-in belt that resembles an *obi*, the traditional sash worn with kimonos. Gernreich called it a "Kabuki dress," after a type of popular theater in Japan. Unlike the *Flowering Plum Kimono*, which is a unique, one-of-a-kind piece of clothing created for a particular Japanese woman, Gernreich's *Kabuki Dress* was made for a line of ready-to-wear clothing mass-marketed to millions of American women.

Kimonos and Indian pajamas arrived in the Western world in the seventeenth century along with other exotic goods from Asia such as tea, porcelain, and spices, carried halfway around the world on the great sailing ships of the East India Company. Sometimes worn for formal occasions, they were also widely adapted for informal, private wear as housecoats, bathrobes, and pajamas for sleeping. In the nineteenth century, a craze for everything Japanese, especially kimonos, began on both sides of the Atlantic when impressive displays of Japanese goods were shown at two world fairs, the 1862 International Exposition in London and the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

In tenth century Japan, Lady Murasaki wrote in *The Tale of Genji* (considered the world's first novel) about how colorful robes were worn at Court as a form of communication. Discuss how clothing sends messages today.

In Japan, everything used in life provides an opportunity for aesthetic expression. Compare this approach to art and life with Native American art, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the work of architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Create a special kimono for yourself. Fold a piece of drawing paper in half, the long way. Outline half of your kimono on it, so the sleeve points away from the fold. Cut around the shape you have drawn, so that when you unfold the paper, it creates a symmetrical shape. Now decorate your kimono with oil pastels or crayons. Will your design be asymmetrical with empty spaces like the *Flowering Plum Kimono*? Paint a thin layer of watercolor wash over the drawing and the blank areas. The oil pastels or crayons act as a resist (like the *yuzen* technique) and the watercolors are like fabric dye.

This kimono is included in The Arts of Asia, *a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant the from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.*