

Dressed to kill in kimonos

Militaristic Japanese garments command attention in de Young propaganda exhibit



By Charles Desmarais

The de Young Museum's just-opened exhibition "Weapons of Mass Seduction," on view through Oct. 7, is a lushly colorful sight to behold. The walls are filled with propaganda posters, bold in both design — primary colors, strong diagonals — and message — lots of declarative phrases ending in exclamation points, for example.

Interspersed throughout, film projections frenetically press their case, unloading simplistic points like blasts from a shotgun: It's us against them. They are very bad. Together we can win. Before long, it dawns that the "us" and even the war are barely distinguishable — American, French, German and Japanese messages flow seamlessly through two world wars.

And then a curatorial text slaps us awake. We are reminded that today we are feeling our way through an atmosphere of disinformation, a time of polished attempts at psychological coercion much like the early 20th century.

That reminder comes in the form of a quotation from a 1937 study by Co-

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A newborn's wrapping garment (*omiyamairi*) (c. 1935), in the exhibition "Weapons of Mass Seduction."

lumbia University's Institute for Propaganda Analysis. The propagandist uses "under-emphasis and over-emphasis," we read, "to dodge issues and evade facts. He resorts to lies, censorship, and distortion. He omits facts. He offers false testimony. ... He creates a smokescreen of clamor by raising a new issue when he wants an embarrassing matter forgotten."

This is a deeply engaging show, raising many disturbing questions about the mind-set a culture must enforce to willingly kill and die. A sign at the entry underlines the point, warning that "offensive symbols, racist depictions, and other troubling images" make up much of the exhibition.

Drawn almost entirely from the collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the de Young's parent organization, many of the works on view will be familiar from reproductions, either in

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A woman's *baori*, a short outer jacket, dates from 1931-45. It contains propaganda images on the inner lining.

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history books or repackaged as campy pop culture decor.

That is, with the notable exception of one class of objects that will be entirely new to most viewers.

At the center of the show is a large glass case displaying 10 Japanese kimonos, recent gifts of collector Erik Jacobsen, each decorated with images ingeniously incorporating military and nationalistic themes. They are stunning.

These days we are all used to T-shirts and, increasingly, other items of clothing that publicly proclaim the wearer's allegiance to a product, a personality or a cause. The de Young Museum's kimonos are fascinating for an entirely different reason.

Clothing like this was not made as logo wear or, let's call it, sloganwear. Most of the imagery was not even intended to be seen in public. Some of the robes are, in fact, undergarments, or *juban*.

Others were made for children, who, presumably, were less likely to be seen outside closely controlled family and community settings. A particularly grand piece in the exhibition is a hand-painted *omiyamairi*, or newborn's wrapping garment. It depicts brave-looking soldiers advancing through heavenly clouds, swords drawn, rising-

sun flags unfurled, while support is provided by tanks in the distance and aircraft above.

When short outer jackets, or *baori*, were decorated with such jingoistic imagery, the designs generally were used as the bright lining in an otherwise somber

Propaganda kimonos were worn among intimate friends and family, their images draped close to the heart.



A *juban*, which is worn under a kimono, with tanks.

"Weapons of Mass Seduction": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through Oct. 7. \$6-\$15, under 18 free. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

coat.

Propaganda kimonos were worn among intimate friends and family, their images draped close to the heart. Operating in a way that is completely opposite to how such clothing works today, they made the public personal, instilling and reinforcing social and political norms.

The scant literature available on the phenomenon explains it as part of a larger fashion between around 1910 and 1945 for what was called *omoshirogara* design. Traditional images of nature gave way to amusing or novelty patterns that conveyed modernity.

"*Omoshirogara* ranged from the dramatic to the amusing, from the serious to the frivolous," writes Jacqueline Atkins, a scholar of the form. "They contained imagery that included new technologies and inventions as well as popular images from stage, screen, and current events."

In the buildup to war, modern military exercises and equipment must have felt quite up-to-the-moment. "The material side of warfare, in textile design at least," Atkins says, "was seen as exciting and reflective of Japan's modern power, rather than as potentially destructive and horrifying."

International one-upmanship, planning for a grand military parade, a certain style of red baseball cap — in these elements of American contemporary life we might hear the echoing sounds of weapons of mass seduction.



A child's kimono, from 1931-45, is decorated with images of tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft.

A boy's summer kimono from around 1940 depicts aircraft and marching soldiers.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco photos

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1