

Japanese Buddhist Priest Robes from the Lucy T. Aldrich Collection

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The principal Japanese Buddhist priest robe, called a kesa, is constructed as a rectangular patchwork of striking pattern and glistening fabric. It is most frequently worn by a priest on top of a full-length kimono and draped over the left shoulder. Although the form of the kesa appears to be relatively simple, its fabrication, symbolism, and the technical virtuosity of its textiles make it a rich and intriguing reflection of the philosophical and aesthetic mores of Japanese religion and culture.

The central field of the kesa comprises five, seven, or nine or more vertical strips of fabric sewn together in a columnar arrangement. The formality of the robe increases with the number of columns. This pieced composition is a direct reference to Buddhism's Indian origins (sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE). Monks following the historical Buddha's teachings took vows of poverty, renouncing all worldly possessions but their robe, which they stitched together from scraps of cast-off material. A priest's fabrication of the vestment was (and still is) considered an act of devotion in itself. Instead of the coarse bits of fabric used in the earlier Indian tradition, kesa made in Japan during the Edo period (1615–1868) such as those on display here were often made from sumptuous textiles produced on specialized silk looms set up in Kyoto in the 16th century.

Despite their expensive fabrics, these kesa preserve the patchwork effect and an entrenched religious symbolism. Many kesa textiles might have originated as Nō theater costumes, court robes, or kimonos donated to temples as a sign of piety. No matter how luxurious, all kesa are likened to a mandala, or a simplified diagram of the Buddhist cosmos, and maintain Buddha at their heart in the form of the central column. Added square patches in the corners (*shiten*) and shoulder area (*niten*) represent the guardians of the four quarters and the two Benevolent Kings who protect Buddhist Law.

The pieces on view in this exhibition were selected from the extensive collection of 104 kesa—the largest such collection outside of Japan—donated by Lucy Truman Aldrich in a 1935 gift and 1955 bequest. In total, Miss Aldrich gave more than 700 Asian textiles, which form the heart of the RISD Museum's Asian textile holdings.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft
patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.285

As in the floral kesa in the far left case, the textile here is of the karaori type often used to make Nō theater costumes. The elaborate piecing here creates the impression of a strewn bed of flowers and

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clearly indicates that this kesa was made from a used and donated garment.

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), late 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.286



This kesa shimmers with alternating bands of phoenixes in flight and jewel-toned lotuses on a diamond-lattice ground. The maker evoked the symbolism of patchwork by applying white braid in the prescribed columnar arrangement rather than actually cutting apart the dynamic textile. Only one applied burgundy braid marker remains in the upper central position to represent the six guardian patches (*niten* and *shiten*).

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), mid 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.289

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), mid 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.295

The lively pattern of repeating, interlocking circles featured in this kesa and the one to the right alludes to the “seven treasures” of Buddhism (most often interpreted as gold, silver, coral, crystal, agate, pearl, and lapis lazuli) and is regarded as highly auspicious for both sacred and secular use. When the pattern was introduced to Japan from China, it was thought to sparkle like a gem; thus it was called shippo, after the Japanese word for the seven treasures. Part of the shippo pattern’s expressive energy here comes from the fact that these two kesa are clearly patchworks. Little attempt was made to preserve the repeat of the woven design, creating an unruly disruption of the original woven pattern’s formality.

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Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1600s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.301



The textile used in this kesa explodes with rich, multicolored floral

sprays superimposed on a dark blue and gold checked ground. It employs a weave structure and fabric called karaori, which is technically characterized by long weft floats (note the texture of the individual flower heads) and often associated with the complex multi-layered designs of Nō theater robes.

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1700s-1800s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.320



Coral branches (symbolizing rarity and perfection) associated with Chinese Taoist beliefs and the triad of the Buddhist pearls of wisdom are both motifs commonly found in textiles of the Chinese Qing dynasty (1644–1911). In the textile used in this kesa, these two auspicious motifs are enlarged and superimposed on a typically Japanese imbricated wave pattern (*segaiha*), creating a dynamic, carefully matched patchwork expanse that would have left a bold impression in the dim light of a temple interior.

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1600s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary warp and weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.322

In this kesa alternating medallions enclose stylized dragons and chrysanthemums arranged in a repeating lattice formation. This highly prized overall pattern, called *shokko*, is one of the oldest known to Japan. Introduced from China, it is associated with the intricacies of temple ceilings. The complex weaving technique seen in each of the kesa in this gallery was an import from China via Korea and is referred to as nishiki, or “beautiful combination of colors.”

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Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary warp and weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.341

This red-ground kesa with large peony heads floating on a golden lattice backdrop shows the ways in which formal Chinese techniques were adapted to create a distinctly Japanese textile of layered composition and comparatively loose arrangement. The gold wefts (*kinran*) defining the lattice were made using a method imported to

Japan by Chinese weavers seeking refuge from the waning Ming dynasty (1368–1644). To make the gold thread, sheets of tough mulberry bark paper were covered in lacquer and gold leaf, and then cut into thin strips less than one-sixteenth of an inch wide for weaving. This extravagant thread is used ubiquitously throughout the kesa on view in this gallery and underscores the sumptuousness of the garments on view.

Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1800-1850s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.397

Although stitched into the traditional columnar configuration, this kesa does not seem like a patchwork because the pictorial design is not interrupted. The multicolored garden setting includes a peacock, a pheasant, tree peonies, and a garden wall of twigs on a red background. The corner patches (*shiten*) and inner patches (*niten*) have white grounds instead of red, but otherwise continue the pattern. Even the peacock's tail continues on both red ground and white through one of the inner squares.



Japanese; Edo

Informal Buddhist vestment (5-column kesa), 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft patterning

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.405

The vast majority of kesa in American museum collections have seven columns. This one has five and was worn for less formal occasions, though its green and gold medallion design (*shokko*) is one of the oldest and most formal patterns woven in Japan (see the adjacent textile to the right).

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Japanese; Edo

Semi-formal Buddhist vestment (7-column kesa), 1700s

Silk, gilt mulberry paper; compound weave, supplementary weft
patterning

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.410

Standing out from the soft gold floral medallions and multicolored cloud motifs of the main textile, this kesa's four corner squares (*shiten*) feature figural representations of the guardians of the four quarters (north, south, east, west). The patches clearly indicate the kesa's function as a representation of the Buddhist cosmos, with the central column standing for the Buddha.