

Japanese Wedding Kimono (Uchikake)

Japanese wedding kimonos (Uchikake) are some of the most splendid garments in worldwide apparel history. Their beginnings were practical and everyday for Japan's noble classes back in the era of stone castles and fortified mansions. Both men and women wore long padded coats to stay warm in the interiors of their castles during the winter. The garments were silk, padded with batting and long, to the floor, to keep the wearer warm. As time passed, they became part of fashionable dress and grew more decorative and elaborate. By the end of the 1800s, Uchikake were most often worn only by women and had become an ornate part of winter court dress. Museum examples of this period still show a practical floor-length robe, but fabric and ornamentation had become much more ornate. Japan's sumptuary laws forbade even the wealthiest commoners from using the brilliant colors and patterns of silk in Uchikake. For the noble class, magnificent Uchikake were worn for weddings and special court occasions.

Right after WWI, the Japanese sumptuary laws were repealed. The result was an explosion of color, design and textile which had previously only been allowed to the nobility. Wealthy commoners rapidly adopted the styles and dress of nobles and began to use the Uchikake for weddings. As Japan opened to the West, and Christian missionaries became active in Japan, the western style white wedding developed a corresponding style in Japan. The Shirumoku, an all white-on-white Uchikake, began to be popular. Likewise, other variations appeared, usually less formal than the traditional Uchikake, but all characterized by beautiful woven, painted or embroidered designs.

The Uchikake has developed into an art form. Correspondingly, cost has climbed to stratospheric levels for high quality and unique design. Each garment is designed to be one-of-a-kind. Modern Uchikake begin at about \$12,000 and go up from there, with most around \$25,000 to \$35,000. The modern Uchikake is long, usually at least 2 meters or more. The sleeves are long and called maiden sleeves. The last time a woman wears long sleeves is at her wedding. From then on, her kimonos have short sleeves to denote a married lady. The Uchikake is worn open, with no obi to tie it, over an ornate kimono with elaborate obi, an under-kimono or juban, all the appropriate undergarments and hair ornaments. When the bride is dressed, she is often wearing 35 to 50 lbs of clothing!

There is no corresponding garment in Western culture that matches an Uchikake's combination of color, design, fabric and symbolism. Uchikake are wonderfully unique and often tell a story or convey particular wishes or dreams for a bride. Common symbols used in Uchikake design are crane pairs, meaning happy marriage, peony flower, for ageless beauty and pine boughs which symbolize wisdom with age. Uchikake are made by master weavers and the fabric often contains loom or finger embroidery. This silk fabric is very labor intensive to weave, thus the high cost, in addition to the artistry of the design.

In the West, Uchikake are most often used as art. Most are displayed with the back of the garment shown where the major design is featured. They are hung on walls or on special stands and can be preserved very well in today's climate controlled homes. They should be removed and shaken out, dusted and cleaned once or twice a year and kept from direct sun. A reputable dry cleaner can handle them very well and can steam out any wrinkles.