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MEN'S FASHION & PHILOSOPHY
SPRING/SUMMER 2010

ISSUE 01



PRINTED IN ENGLAND 01 >
9 771792 125004

VARIOUS VOICES

BY VASSILIS KARIDIS



These clothes date back to the early part of the Edo period in 17th-century Japan. They are made of paper using two methods, *shifu* and *kamiko*.

Kamiko has been practised in Japan since the 10th century BC. Strong, multi-ply paper is softened through repeated crumpling and straightening, then impregnated with vegetable starch juice for a cloth-like texture. Kamiko garments, though durable and water-repellent, cannot be washed, so they retain a rough, provisional character.

Shifu clothes are made of paper that is cut into thin strips, twisted into compact threads and then woven into "fabric". The process was developed by the impoverished rural population in the 14th century. As there were no other raw materials available, farmers used the pages of their old account books to make shifu weaves. The characters on the paper remained visible on the finished fabric, forming a speckled pattern. It was not long before the upper classes noticed this textile and turned shifu into a cult. The Japanese warrior elite, the Samurai, refined the technique further, using elaborate folding, cutting and spinning to create fine threads and noble cloths. Because paper has a powerful significance in Japanese culture, these fabrics were often used for ceremonial wear. As an invisible sign of spiritual devotion, the Samurai wrote personal prayers on the paper before twisting it into threads.

The forgotten history of this unusual textile was rediscovered by ATOPOS, while the organisation was researching its 2007 exhibition, *RRRIPPI! Paper Fashion*. Its team undertook a tour of obscure Japanese museums where incredible examples of paper garments were preserved. Textile expert Mrs. Yoshiko I. Wada assisted the organisation in locating and acquiring a number of rare pieces from textile dealers across Japan.

The shockingly avant-garde nature of these 400-year-old designs should make us consider anew the possibilities of raw materials, eco design and contemporary haute couture. ATOPOS believes that we can create anew by researching further into the histories of diverse cultures and rethinking the most basic materials that surround us today.

Text by Vassilis Zidianakis, artistic director of ATOPOS Cultural Organisation in Athens.

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This shifu vest would have been worn as the first layer of clothing, directly against the skin. Sweat marks were frowned upon in Japan at the time, and the vest would have prevented them. It was noted for its capacity to absorb sweat and at the same time allow the skin to breathe.

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These account books from the Meiji period would have been used to make paper threads.

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This water-repellent kamiko coat would have protected its wearer from cold and precipitation.

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This kamiko cape would have been worn by porters to cover the parcels on their back. It fans out to cover large packages, while the back bears the emblem of their patron.



