

# Traditional Kimono Featuring Crane Pattern Design

The crane-designed pattern is a familiar motif in Japan, often used during joyous occasions. In this section, we hear about the kimono with this pattern from an expert specializing in the study of kimonos. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

“An exemplary example of a kimono adorned with crane patterns is the *uchikake*<sup>1</sup>, often worn during wedding ceremonies. Kimonos commonly feature designs incorporating symbols of longevity such as turtles, cranes, and patterns representing good fortune, such as pine, bamboo, and plum,” explains Oyama Yuzuruha from the Research Section of the Tokyo National Museum.

The use of cranes as symbols of longevity and good fortune motifs<sup>2</sup> originated in ancient China. In the late 9th to 10th centuries, the spread of Shenxian thought<sup>3</sup> led to the depiction of the immortal beings Jusei and Fukurokuju riding on the back of cranes as one of their motifs. This imagery began to be represented in textile arts. It is believed that this philosophy was transmitted to Japan around the 11th century.

“Although kimonos adorned with crane designs can be found as early as the 16th century in Japan, their deliberate popularity as symbols of good fortune became more evident in the 17th century,” notes Oyama. “Within the *kosode*<sup>4</sup> believed to have been worn by women of the samurai class, there is a formal garment known as *jinashi kosode*<sup>5</sup>. This attire is adorned with embroidered crane and tortoise motifs, as well as pine, bamboo, and plum, with the fabric dyed in three distinct colors: red, white, and black. This design, once worn by women of the samurai class, has been passed down as a tradition and is now incorporated into the modern Japanese wedding *uchikake*.”

The crane patterns designed on the *uchikake* depict a pair of cranes flying together, symbolizing a harmonious and enduring marriage. This design symbolizes wishes for marital bliss and lasting happiness. “The elegant flight of cranes, resembling a dance, is a factor

contributing to the popularity of their design, appreciated for both its symbolism and aesthetic beauty,” says Oyama.

She continues, “While the chrysanthemum is also renowned as a symbol of Japan, it is specifically used as the imperial crest for the Imperial family. On the other hand, while crane motifs may be used in the imperial court, they are not exclusively utilized for the Imperial family. This pattern was not prohibited for civilian use, contributing to its widespread popularity.” Additionally, auspicious patterns are believed to offer protection when worn or put on, making them particularly prevalent in traditional Japanese attire, especially kimonos.

“The crane is often depicted in pairs, and its depiction includes both closed-beak and open-beak expressions, symbolizing the concept of *A-un*<sup>6</sup>. In doing so, there is also an intention to convey a prayer for a healthy and harmonious life,” comments Oyama. The paired crane pattern expresses the wishes and prayers of the Japanese people. In this way, understanding the significance of the design enhances the joy and fondness for kimonos even more. 📖

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1. An elegantly formal kimono, still worn today, often by brides during weddings.
  2. A collective term for patterns symbolizing good omens and signs of good fortune. While many are influenced by ancient China, some have originated in Japan. Representative patterns include cranes, turtles, pine, bamboo, plum, the Four Gentlemen (orchid, bamboo, plum, and chrysanthemum), and treasures.
  3. An ancient Chinese philosophy in which people believed in the existence of sages with eternal youth and longevity and wished to become one by acquiring the secret of immortality.
  4. In contrast to the voluminous sleeves used in courtly and warrior ceremonial attire, the cuffs are small and narrow and the size of the sleeves is smaller. This laid the foundation for the modern kimono design.
  5. A fabric minutely decorated with extensive embroidery, *shibori* (tie-dyeing), and others where there is no blank space. This intricate design is commonly found in formal attire.
  6. A phonetic representation of the first and last characters of the Sanskrit language, in esoteric Buddhism, it symbolizes the beginning and end of all things. It also represents exhalation and inhalation. In Japan, the expression “*a-un no kokyū* (breathing)” signifies spending a long time together and understanding each other without words, indicating an extraordinary level of harmony.



Kosode made from black, red, white-dyed *rinzu* silk with crane, pine, flower, and bird patterns, held in the Agency for Cultural Affairs collection. Various crane motifs are intricately embroidered on the sleeves and body.



The *iro-uchikake* (colored *uchikake*) features the same pattern, worn in three colors: red, black, and white. Paired cranes are embroidered on both sleeves. Held in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum.



*Karaori* (a silk fabric with raised patterns) featuring red background with flower, diamond, turtle shell, and crane pattern. The design, symbolizing good fortune, features cranes arranged in diamond shapes. The cranes' beaks alternate between closed and open. Held in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

