



Redesigning tradition

Text and photo **ROB GILHOOLY**

Despite having written a best-selling book on Japanese kimono, **Maia Maniglier** resists any suggestion that she is an expert. If anything, she says, it was her love of kimono that inspired her admired designs for many media.

“TRADITION IS NOT STAGNANT; IT’S A LIVING, EVOLVING THING, AND WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO REVISIT TRADITIONAL ITEMS TO ENSURE THEIR MESSAGE NEVER DIES OUT”

“I like to think of myself as a translator of Japanese customs, and it is through my acquaintance with kimono that I arrived at that place,” says the Jerusalem-born Parisian, who is president of graphic design and multimedia company *exprime* Inc.

“The symbols of traditional Japanese customs still exist, but [Japan has] lost the stories from which they evolved. I want to re-tell those stories, to re-interpret the motifs and designs, but in a way that will be easily comprehended by people today.”

Among the distinctly Japanese objects that she has redesigned are the kimono’s lighter cousin, the *yukata*,

folding fans and *kokoro-zuke*, an umbrella term for monetary gifts, for various occasions such as weddings and funerals, that are usually given in special envelopes.

Her name for these kimono-inspired products is *maiaonomi* (Maia’s taste). They include both designs that incorporate her take on traditional motifs and symbols – and ones that are entirely of her own creation.

“I was looking at *kokoro-zuke* one day and realised there was not one that I liked,” says Maniglier, who majored in Japanese at Université des Langues Orientales Paris. “So I decided I must make them myself. That’s how it all started.

“The root of it was indeed kimono and the symbolism that the kimono represents. Like so many traditional Japanese items, the kimono is not just fashion. It’s a whole universe in itself.”

Her envelopes are a perfect example of how she incorporates kimono and traditional motifs into her designs. One envelope folds in a manner very much suggestive of the way a kimono is worn, the edges of the paper made to look like the hems of the garment. Another design does away with the bow that is wrapped around some more elaborate envelopes, such as those used for weddings, in favour of one that is cut out of the envelope itself.

“So many traditional items and customs are fading from modern Japanese life, and one reason is that they no longer suit the way Japanese live today,” she says. “So I decided to redesign them so that they could be more readily assimilated by today’s urbanised society.”

Maniglier first arrived in Japan during the last days of the economic bubble, landing a job promoting a Parisian exhibition at a Seibu department store in Tokyo. Prior to that, while a student in Paris, she had managed an amateur Japanese band on tour.

Some of the band members were Seibu staff, she says, and six months later she was invited to Japan on a six-month contract. “That was in 1989. I have never looked back”.

She has also worked at telecommunications giant NTT and an architect’s office. Each time, she says, her unique bi-cultural vision was as highly valued

as her ability to adapt to Japanese working environments.

“In my time I have made my fair share of green tea [for colleagues], and foreign friends would say ‘what are you doing? That’s not why you went to university,’” she says.

“I never understood that view – it only takes a few minutes to make the tea, but by doing so one can show respect for the Japanese way of doing things.”

This is a philosophy that Maniglier has followed since founding her business, *exprime*, 15 years ago. The company’s clients have included Japan Airlines, for which the company creates unique cover graphics for the inflight magazine *Skyward*, and sake brewery Tatsuuma Honke, for which they designed bottle labels for a special New Year’s gift box.

The designs in each case fused modern, almost impressionistic, elements with traditional colours and emblems.

Meanwhile, her limited edition kimono have been exhibited around Japan, garnering praise from traditional garment-makers and fashion designers alike, and culminating with the publication of her book, *A Parisian and Kimono*.

“So much traditional culture in the West disappeared several generations ago, but in Japan there are still people alive today who follow the customs of hundreds of years ago,” says Maniglier.

“It means that young people can learn [these customs] directly rather than through books. There was a time when Japanese became afraid of their own culture. Fortunately, more and more people are going back to their roots as a kind of reaction to consumerism.”

Maniglier is bemused by those traditionalists who decry young people’s efforts to adapt tradition to their modern lifestyles.

“Japanese tend to place the bar too high. Things like the mini-skirt kimono worn by girls in Shibuya. Some people might not like that, but I say ‘why not? It’s fun’.

“Tradition is not stagnant; it’s a living, evolving thing, and we should continue to revisit traditional items to ensure their message never dies out.”