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Part I: *Researchers in the Field*

Angelina Illes

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The Fascination with Japanese-Styled Gowns: A Quantitative Perspective on Ready-Made Garments at the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century

Angelina Illes

This essay explores the circulation of the japonsse zijde rok, a popular ready-made garment that initially came to the Dutch Republic from Japan via the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and was much sought after by European elites. The study of these rare and expensive robes has been complicated by the fact that a variety of names are used to describe the same or similar garment types, some of which have different points of origin and may even be made from different materials, which the Dutch Textile Trade Project's data and web applications has helped to clarify. This essay also shows how the Dutch Textile Trade Project's open-access data can be used for quantitative research inquiries and to create independent data visualizations

- 1 Assisted by modern forms of transportation, today many textiles—and the garments made from them—easily circulate the globe, oftentimes to the detriment of our environment.¹ However, the interconnectedness of today's billion-dollar fast-fashion industry is not a modern phenomenon but instead has its roots in the early modern period. From the seventeenth century onward, the Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and WIC, respectively) played a major role in expanding textile trade networks on a global scale.² Ready-made garments were among the variety of traded textile goods, and none were more sought-after in the Dutch Republic than the so-called *japonsse zijde rok*, a Japanese silk robe or *kosode* that was as highly priced as it was popular.³ This item signified the Dutch Republic's exclusive trade relations with Japan and demonstrated the growing taste for Asian imports at the time.⁴
- 2 One of the few surviving gowns made in Japan for export is today part of the Newhailes collection in Scotland (figs. 1 and 2). This padded kimono-style garment was made according to Western tastes, which required larger proportions and favored a purely decorative arrangement of patterning. The blue silk—which includes Japanese parsley motifs and curious fake family crests—was woven, dyed, and stitched together in Japan before being shipped to a Western market.⁵ Few robes were intended for export,⁶ highlighting their preciousness. Compared to robes made for the domestic Japanese market, export robes are typically floor length, have wide sleeves, and are heavily padded, among other modifications. Many preserved export garments are made from colorful fabrics with eye-catching patterns, suggesting that European consumers preferred more conspicuous styles.

- 3 As the rarity of the above example demonstrates, working on early modern textiles and garments often means studying just a small number of objects that have survived up to the present day. Access to these often-fragile objects can be limited, making scholars dependent on the digitization efforts of museums and other cultural institutions. In light of these obstacles, researchers must often rely on other sources, such as visual or written evidence. By bringing together visual, sartorial, and written evidence in one digital space, the Dutch Textile Trade Project's website and applications offer new interpretive possibilities that can contribute to our understanding of historical textiles. In particular, the project's interactive web applications allow for user-directed exploration of the quantitative dimensions of the Dutch global textile trade.⁷ In this essay, I will demonstrate the benefits of such an approach by focusing on the study of japonse zijde rok. I will focus on the following questions: To what extent can these web applications clarify the relationship between the representation of textiles in painted images and the textiles themselves? How can these aggregated data help researchers link archival descriptions of textile names to the actual textiles in question? And, specific to the japonse zijde rok, when production locations shifted toward the end of the seventeenth century, did the geographical descriptions of these robes also change? What can the dataset tell us about the increasing demand for japonse zijde rokken? What kind of quantitative and qualitative conclusions can we make from the dataset?

Picturing the Japonse Rok

- 4 The question of whether paintings are a reliable source of information for historical costumes and textiles is a matter of constant debate among scholars.⁸ Although it is rarely the case that an extant garment can be linked directly to a work of art, some scholars mistake pictorial representation for material reality, overlooking possible interventions by the artist or patron. Other researchers, however, have used a combination of materialist and art-historical methodologies to treat costume and dress as important carriers of meaning.⁹ These scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of the often-neglected relationship between garments and their representation by using a wide variety of sources to contextualize the visual material.
- 5 Painted garments can reveal contemporary tastes for certain styles or fabrics from a particular geographical region. This is evident in paintings from the Dutch Republic, where Japanese-styled robes started to appear in genre scenes and portraiture from around the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁰ By the end of the century, the japonse rok was not only a popular status symbol for wealthy commissioners but also an attribute for images of scholars and a mechanism for artists' self-fashioning.¹¹ Probably the best-known depiction of this novel garment is in Johannes Vermeer's *The Geographer* (fig. 3). The male figure's attributes identify him as a scholar, engrossed in his survey work and wearing a comfortable-looking dark-blue robe, belted around the waist. The similarity to preserved garments like the one mentioned above (see fig. 1) invites a juxtaposition that can expand our knowledge of both media. The tradition of representing scholars and artists wearing Japanese-styled gowns continued into the eighteenth century, although the choice of this precious garment does not necessarily reflect the actual working attire

of an artist, as Martha Hollander has argued.¹² For instance, the portrait attributed to Aert Schouman (probably a self-portrait) shows the painter pausing at his easel (fig. 4). Dressed in a light brown robe with floral decoration, the pipe-smoking painter casually stares at the viewer, perhaps reflecting a preference for less formal self-fashioning. Researchers trying to connect a specific term or actual garment to such a representation are presented with a number of significant challenges, which the Dutch Textile Trade Project may help alleviate.

Japanse Zijde Rok: A Garment with Many Names

- 6 “Japanse zijde rok” is a seventeenth-century Dutch term for robes that initially arrived in the Dutch Republic aboard VOC ships from Japan.¹³ These precious silk robes were a gift to Dutch traders invited to the court of the Tokugawa Shogun in Edo (today’s Tokyo).¹⁴ At annual visits, the renewal of trade relations was followed by a gift-giving ceremony.¹⁵ This is the reason why they were also called *shenkagierocken* (gift gowns) and *keyserrocken* (imperial gowns).¹⁶ The term “japone rok” appeared in VOC documents and other written sources, such as letters or inventories, in the second half of the seventeenth century in the Dutch Republic. By 1700, various names, such as *chamberlouc*, *japon*, *nachtrok*, *nachttabbaard*, and *cambaay* were used to describe the japone rok.¹⁷ In secondary literature, the name “banyan” is sometimes used interchangeably with “japone rok,” although recent research suggests that it may have referred to a comparable fashion trend in England, where the term does not appear in published sources until the 1730s.¹⁸ Complicating matters, “banyan” could also refer to a similarly tailored garment produced in India but made from chintz, rather than silk.¹⁹ In short, the geographically derived descriptions attached to these garments by Dutch traders and merchants often signaled foreign gowns in a broad or generic sense and should thus be treated cautiously.
- 7 Data from the Dutch Textile Trade Project allow researchers to take a distant view of variations in textile naming conventions, which can help clarify contemporary usage. For example, the bar graph in figure 5 represents all the textiles described as japone zijde rok in the dataset (shown in red). When the total number of japone zijde rok is compared to those with the modifier “Japan” (shown in turquoise), it becomes clear that not all japone zijde rokken were described with that geographical modifier “Japan.”²⁰
- 8 In fact, as figure 6 shows, in 1710 a number of robes were described with the geographical modifier “China.” Japan and China are the only two geographical modifiers recorded in VOC records. Japone rokken recorded on cargo lists from 1715, 1716, and 1718, as well as parts of 1709 and 1723, were assigned no geographical modifiers at all. The terms *japon*, *rok*, *klead*, and *mantel*—which are present in the dataset as well—might also refer to japone rokken, but it is impossible to be certain. Interestingly, selecting the term “japon”—which is often used interchangeably with “japone rok”—yields some points of origin in Persia (with a total quantity of five hundred pieces) and the Malabar Coast in India (150 pieces). The term “banyan,” however, does not appear in the data during this period.

- 9 In the Dutch Republic, the high demand for this garment could not be met by Japanese exports alone.²¹ Not only did this demand stimulate the creation of domestic imitations made from imported textiles, but it also led the VOC from 1684 onward to order robes from India made of chintz.²² To see whether Japanese-styled kimonos produced elsewhere were still similarly described, the web applications of the Dutch Textile Trade Project offer helpful geographical information about the distribution of textile names. For the given time frame (1700–1724), the name *japonse zijde rok* was used for garments originating in the regions of Nagasaki (176), Batavia (281), and Ceylon (five), today’s Sri Lanka. Cargo data from this period suggest, however, that this name may have been used for other types of garments as well.
- 10 Figure 7 shows a map representing Dutch trade in *japonse zijde rok* between 1704 to 1724, based on the dataset.²³ This map visualizes the trading ports, ship routes, number of shipments, and quantity of *japonse zijde rok* (by individual garment). A portion of these robes originate in Japan, where they were prepared for shipping at a factory in Deshima, an artificial island in the bay of Nagasaki.²⁴ From there, all the shipments went to the VOC’s headquarters in Batavia, today’s Jakarta, before going on the homebound fleet. Interestingly, 495 pieces in total of *japonse zijde rok* were shipped from Batavia to the Dutch Republic, exceeding the number of items shipped from Japan by 319 pieces.
- 11 Figure 7 also shows the circulation of garments described as *japonse zijde rokken* in the VOC cargo lists. The fact that more textiles were documented at the VOC’s headquarters in Batavia than they received from Japan might have two explanations. One possibility is that stored items were shipped with a delay, although this seems unlikely due to the large difference in the number of textiles. More likely, I would argue, this discrepancy is an indication of additional garments produced elsewhere and described by other names. For instance, the term *cabajen* or *cambayen*, a finished robe made from chintz and produced in quantity in the Coromandel Coast in India,²⁵ might be a different name for the same garment, which would have been renamed when packaged and shipped from Batavia. Further research on alternative production sites in India is needed, as it would help clarify the complexities of this global trading network.
- 12 The majority of the *japonse zijde rok* shipped by the VOC during this period were destined for the Dutch Republic, with the important exception of fifteen robes that were shipped to Ceylon from Batavia in 1710. During the same period, forty-six pieces in total went from Ceylon to the Dutch Republic, suggesting that additional garments were made on the model of imported *japonse rokken* or shipped in from elsewhere. Interestingly, *japonse rokken* also traveled on WIC ships from the Dutch Republic to current-day Benin (three) and Angola (six), where they were presented as gifts to the Angolan king, demonstrating the wide reach of VOC trade and the often-overlooked connections between VOC and WIC trade.²⁶
- 13 The Dutch Textile Trade Project web applications also enable users to download the complete dataset as a comma-separated values (CSV) file, which provides even more detailed information for further investigation. For instance, these data suggest a decline in *japonse zijde rok* coming from Japan beginning in the eighteenth century. According to the dataset, between 1704 and

1724, six ships reached Batavia from Japan with a total of 176 pieces. While in 1707 the cargo contained fifty robes, the following shipments only had thirty and in 1723 only six. The decrease of Japanese exports of *japone zijde rokken* during this period becomes more conspicuous when compared to cargoes from the seventeenth century chosen from secondary literature. In 1651, a ship leaving Japan had, among other items, two hundred Japanese silk robes as well as some silk wadding on board.²⁷ In 1692, they received 123 gifted robes in total. Yet, depending on the mood of the Shogun, the number of gowns could change or even be eliminated entirely.²⁸ Hollander has suggested that the decrease toward the end of the seventeenth century could also be connected to the already-established production of *japone rokken* in the Dutch Republic.²⁹ Trends like these are easily visible in the dataset without having to distill cargo entries from the abundance of literature. As the Dutch Textile Trade Project amasses more data from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, new patterns of trade are sure to emerge from the web applications, which will be an asset to researchers concerned with the global dimension of the Dutch textile trade, especially in light of the limited number of extant garments and textiles from this period.

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Biography

Angelina Illes is a PhD candidate at the department of Art History at the University of Vienna. She studied Art History in Vienna and at the University of York in England. In her PhD project, she explores 'Oriental' and 'foreign' costumes in seventeenth century Dutch painting, especially, in the light of increased textile trade of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Angelina participated in the Rijksmuseum Summer School "Museum Objects as Evidence" (2022) and gained valuable experience with object-based approaches.

angelina.illes@univie.ac.at

Illustrations



Fig. 1 Unknown maker, Japan, *Japone Rok*, plain-weave silk, stencil paste-resist dyeing (*katazome*), 1700–1720, National Trust for Scotland, Newhailes House, Musselburgh, Scotland



Fig. 2 Detail of *Japone Rok* (fig. 1)



Fig. 3 Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer*, 1669, oil on canvas, 51.6 x 45.4 cm. Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, inv. no. 1149 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 4 Attributed to Aert Schouman, *Portrait of a Painter* (perhaps the Artist Himself), 1730, oil on panel, 35.5 x 27 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-4157 (artwork in the public domain)

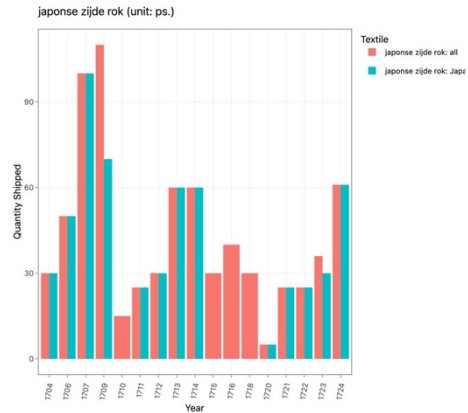


Fig. 5 The bar graph shows the distribution of the textile name japone zijde rok and the modifier 'Japan' based on dataset.

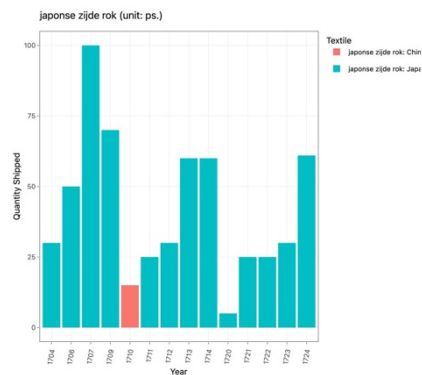


Fig. 6 The bar graph shows the distribution of the textile name japone zijde rok with the modifiers Japan (turquoise) and China (red) based on dataset. "Textiles, Modifiers, and Values" application, Visualizing Textile Circulation in the Dutch Global Market

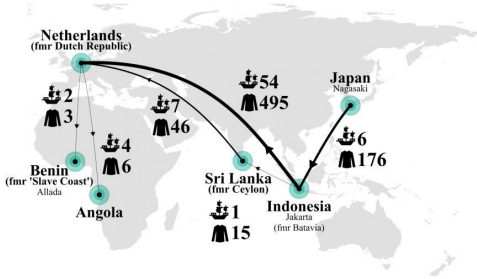


Fig. 7 Map of Dutch textile trade in *japonse zijde rok* showing the number of shipments and garments between 1704 – 1724 with today's names of geographical regions and colonial names in brackets. Data represented on map is based on the dataset of the web application (downloaded on September 6, 2022). Map made by Maximilian Tschol based on the dataset.

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Endnotes

- 1 On textile waste, fast fashion, and its impact on the environment, see, for instance, Abigail Beall, "Why Clothes Are So Hard to Recycle," BBC, July 13, 2020, [HTTPS://WWW.BBC.COM/FUTURE/ARTICLE/20200710-WHY-CLOTHES-ARE-SO-HARD-TO-RECYCLE](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200710-why-clothes-are-so-hard-to-recycle).
- 2 Jonathan Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade: 1585–1740* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 3 Martha Hollander, "Vermeer's Robe: Costume, Commerce and Fantasy in the Early Modern Netherlands," *Dutch Crossing* 35, no. 2 (July 2011): 183, [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1179/155909011X13033128278713](https://doi.org/10.1179/155909011X13033128278713).
- 4 Karina Corrigan, Jan van Campen, and Femke Diercks, eds., *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2015).
- 5 For further information on this garment, see Emma Inglis, "Bringing the Banyan to the V&A," National Trust for Scotland "Stories" (blog), March 4, 2020, [HTTPS://WWW.NTS.ORG.UK/STORIES/BRINGING-THE-BANYAN-TO-THE-V-A](https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/bringing-the-banyan-to-the-v-a); Susan North, "Indian Gowns and Banyans: New Evidence and Perspectives," *Costume* 51, no. 1 (2020): 30–55; Yuzuruha Oyama, "The 'Nippon Kimono' Voyages to Europe," in *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk*, ed. Anna Jackson (London: V&A Publishing, 2020), 131–136.
- 6 North, "Indian Gowns and Banyans," 37.
- 7 The dataset includes WIC data for 1700–1723 and VOC data for 1704–1724.
- 8 For a critical exploration of the use of visual sources in the study of dress and various other approaches, see Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 115–149.
- 9 For some of the few historical costume monographs on European artists, see Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Emilie Gordenker, *Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) and the Representation of Dress in Seventeenth-Century Portraiture* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001); Sara van Dijk, "Beauty adorns virtue': Dress in Portraits of Women by Leonardo da Vinci" (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2015). On costumes as important signifiers in portraiture, see Emilie Gordenker, "The Rhetoric of Dress in Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Portraiture," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 57 (1999): 87–104. For one

- of the only art-historical discussions on dress studies as a fruitful method for art history, see Philipp Zitzlsperger, *Dürers Pelz und das Recht im Bild: Kleiderkunde als Methode der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie, 2008), 118–155.
- 10 Starting from the Dutch Republic, this fashion trend spread to other countries, illustrated in portraiture toward the end of the seventeenth century. On this phenomenon in England, see North, “Indian Gowns and Banyans,” 38–45; and for New York, see Cynthia Kok, “In Touch with the Dutch, or, Fashioning Colonial New York’s Merchant Elite,” *The Junto: A Group Blog for Early American History*, September 13, 2018, [HTTPS://EARLYAMERICANISTS.COM/2018/09/13/IN-TOUCH-WITH-THE-DUTCH-OR-FASHIONING-COLONIAL-NEW-YORKS-MERCHANT-ELITE](https://earlyamericanists.com/2018/09/13/in-touch-with-the-dutch-or-fashioning-colonial-new-yorks-merchant-elite).
- 11 Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 180, 190.
- 12 Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 190. On the fanciful attire of artists and the *tabbaard* as a forerunner of the japone rok, see De Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy*, 27–51.
- 13 The old Dutch term “rok” was used for a warm overgarment or dress; see Margaretha Breukink-Peeze, “Japanese Robes, a Craze,” in *Imitation and Inspiration: Japanese Influence on Dutch Art*, ed. Stefan van Raay (Amsterdam: Art Unlimited Books, 1989), 54. In Japanese documents they were described as Nippon kimono; see Oyama, “Nippon Kimono,” 129.
- 14 The first contact with the Tokugawa Shogun was made in 1609, and from 1633 the Dutch were granted exclusive trade rights; see Charlotte van Rappard-Boon, *Imitation and Inspiration: Japanese Influence on Dutch Art from 1650 to Today* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1992), 13.
- 15 Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 180. On gift-giving and Japanese gowns, see Ellen O’Neil Rife, “The Exotic Gift and the Art of the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2013), 172–212.
- 16 Breukink-Peeze, “Japanese Robes, a Craze,” 55, 56.
- 17 Johanna der Kinderen-Besier, *Spelevaart der Mode: De kledij onzer voorouders in de 17e eeuw* (Amsterdam 1950), 222; Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 187; Anne Gerritsen, “Domesticating Goods from Overseas: Global Material Culture in the Early Modern Netherlands,” *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016): 6.
- 18 In seventeenth-century England, the term “Indian gown” was used to describe those kinds of garments, while until the 1730s the term “banyan” was exclusively associated with a particular social class in India; see North, “Indian Gowns and Banyans,” 38–45.
- 19 Ariane Fennetaux, “‘Indian Gowns Small and Great’: Chintz Banyans Ready Made in the Coromandel, c. 1680–c. 1780,” *Costume* 55, no. 1 (2021): 49–73.
- 20 On the principles of the naming conventions of the Dutch Textile Trade Project, see “Our Data,” Dutch Textile Trade, accessed March 2, 2023, [HTTPS://DUTCHTEXTILETRADE.ORG/DATA](https://dutchtextiletrade.org/data).
- 21 They were made popular at VOC auctions; see Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 180. For further information on distribution through so-called *winckel van Oost-Indische waeren* (East Indies shops), see Jaap van der Veen, “East Indies Shops in Amsterdam,” in Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks, *Asia in Amsterdam*, 136–141.

- 22 Breukink-Peeze, “Japanese Robes, a Craze,” 56. On local tailors who specialized in making japonse rokken, see Bianca du Mortier, *Mode & Kostuum* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2016), 44–45. It is suggested that the cloth for producing these garments in the Dutch Republic was initially imported from China and later from India; see Anne Gerritsen, “Domesticating Goods from Overseas: Global Material Culture in the Early Modern Netherlands,” *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016): 6. For more information on finished garments made in India, see Fennetaux, “Indian Gowns Small and Great,” 49–73.
- 23 The results are based on the dataset downloaded on September 6, 2022. This includes entries of the textile name “japonse zijde rok” in various spellings.
- 24 Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 181.
- 25 North, “Indian Gowns and Banyans,” 38.
- 26 In the process of writing my essay, I discovered an inconsistency in terminology between the VOC and WIC of the dataset. These entries did not show up as part of the textile name search for “japonse zijde rok,” but instead under the textile name “rok.” However, some version of “japonse zijde rok” is part of the column “textile_modifier_fulltext.” After I consulted with Carrie Anderson and Marsely Kehoe, the data was updated.
- 27 Rappard-Boon, *Imitation and Inspiration*, 15.
- 28 Breukink-Peeze, “Japanese Robes, a Craze,” 55.
- 29 Hollander, “Vermeer’s Robe,” 193 n5.