

Brocade *Karaori* with Paulownia and Phoenixes

This brocade kimono is a *karaori*—a luxurious garment worn in noh theater by actors portraying female characters. The term *karaori* refers both to the garment and the type of fabric from which it is made. *Karaori* production flourished in Japan during the Edo period (1603–1867), but this particular example dates to the turn of the seventeenth century.

Karaori fabric, like all brocades, consists of a ground weave overlaid with a float weave. In other words, the weaver starts with a basic pattern of warp and weft threads, then adds in supplementary weft threads in certain areas to create an embroidery-like design that overlays the ground weave. Unlike true embroidery, the design is created as part of the weaving process, rather than stitched on afterward. In this garment, the ground weave is a dark green silk twill, while a pattern of phoenixes and flowering paulownia trees has been added using threads of white, pale blue-green, yellowish green, light grey, navy blue, yellow, and red.

Over the centuries, *karaori* became increasingly luxurious, and later versions often used lavish amounts of gold and silver thread in the design. *Karaori* worn in modern-day noh performances may weigh several kilograms and often sparkle under the lights. In contrast, this piece shows the colorful, but more sedate, style of the Momoyama cultural period (1573–1615). Another characteristic of this time period is the way the designs alternate in bands from the top of the garment to the bottom. For example, the phoenixes on the sleeves face left in the top row but right in the row below.

The noh theatrical tradition is highly stylized and performed by actors in masks and ornate costumes. The design of the costumes indicates the type of role an actor is playing. A *karaori* with a red ground weave, for example, is reserved for younger female characters. Other ground colors, like the green used here, indicate a middle-aged or older character. Regal motifs like the phoenix and paulownia usually signify someone of great majesty.

Ishikawa Prefecture has a robust noh tradition. The prefecture's precursor, Kaga domain, was ruled from the late sixteenth century until 1871 by the wealthy Maeda family, who invested heavily in artistic and cultural enterprises. They were passionate about noh, fostering and supporting the local Hōshō school of performers throughout their tenure.

As an early surviving example of *karaori*, this piece was designated an Important Cultural Property in 1974.