

# Wren ★ Feathers

## General tips for sewing traditional Japanese clothing at small scale

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I assume you have basic sewing knowledge and the explanation should suffice, but if you need help please email me!

Beginning seamstresses will be thrilled to know traditional Japanese clothing is made based on rectangles. There are no tricky sleeves to set in and no gathering!

Historically, very long lengths of fabric made from silk, linen, hemp and cotton were woven on narrow (13"/33cm) looms, and every inch was used economically for the garment it turned into. These were often pleated, tucked and folded onto the wearer, so multiple sizes/generations could wear the same garment. Kimono (yes, that's also the plural) were often taken apart to be cleaned, and then re-sewn later.

I found a very interesting point of view in [The Book of Kimono](#) by Norio Yamanaka:

“Although Western-style clothes, whether ready-made or tailor-made, come in a great variety of forms and designs and sizes, the form is fixed before the garment is put on. Thus the garment either fits a particular person or it does not. Quite the opposite is true of kimono, since from the most formal to the most casual they all have the same form.... It is possible to speak of the true form of a kimono only after it has been put on a human body. In other words it is the wearer who, according to his proficiency, creates the form...” (Page 9)

So what kind of fabrics should you be stocking up on for your doll's "trip"?

Japan is maybe not as well-known for weaving as some other countries, but does have a lot of interesting woven textiles. My favorite is a hand-woven fabric called *kasuri*, in which decoration is achieved either by applying a resist and dyeing warp threads before weaving, similar to ikat of Guatemala. Unique to Japan, as far as I'm aware, is dyeing both warp and weft with a resist pattern in, speaking from experience, an amazingly tricky process. Japan has historically also excelled at hand-painting and stenciling on silk, and many elegant pieces of clothing were created this way, with subtle color gradations and intricate flowers and leaves to match the season.

Japan is also known for several other special fabric decorating techniques, such as a type of dyeing called *shibori*, stenciling called *katazome*, and a quilting method called *sashiko* we'll explore in a few weeks.

For almost all of these projects, there's no end of cute Asian cotton prints that are sold for quilting that are perfect for doll clothes. Any of these can be made for a 13" doll from a fat quarter.

At small scale, I strongly suggest you do NOT try make these outfits from the polyester Chinese brocade at your local fabric store. It is too thick, frays easily, will not hold pleats/draping well, and is just not authentic for anything except maybe an obi. For silk, check your closet or a resale shop for a scarf or blouse you might be able to recycle. You want something quite thin if you're going to layer it. There are some polyester fabrics that are very thin and woven in a crepe weave, so they're dull, rather than shiny. Those would be my second choice after the quilting cotton.

What colors should you choose? Red is hugely popular for little girls, and the traditional blue and white is a safe choice too. There are actually accepted colors for certain seasons in Japan, and Yamanaka says:

“Choosing colors to mirror the seasons and their moods is a reflection of how the Japanese became finely attuned to even the slightest change of the seasons and learned to appreciate the beauty of things in nature... No one would think of putting on a kimono with cherry blossom designs in the winter or fall. Cherry blossoms are spring designs and should be worn when they are in full bloom. For winter one might choose snow scenes or plum blossoms. Representative summer and fall designs are ocean waves and red maple leaves.” (From The Book of Kimono by Norio Yamanaka, page 8)

## A few sewing hints



At inner curves, like the neckline, clip as you're sewing it to the straight-grain collar band. After sewing, clip the band as well in the same spots, and then finish the raw edges as desired.



For outer curves and angles, like the front of a kimono, cut a v-shaped notch. In all cases, when sewing to straight-grain bands, it's easiest to have the band on the bottom.



To avoid annoyance/worries at the collar, make your collar band a little longer and trim excess



Serging at the underarm: Sew almost to the underarm, clip, pull it into a "V" and keep going. On a regular machine, stitch first, clip, then finish raw edges.

# Right over left or left over right?

Depends if you're alive (L) or dead (R)!



As you (a human) are putting them on, your right hand folds that side in first, then the left crosses over it. If you have trouble remembering, or (like me) get confused because it's opposite when you dress a doll, **just remember that to look correct, the collar should be like a lowercase "y"**. Historically this was reversed when dressing corpses in traditional clothing. Many other Asian clothes that wrap shirts around in an overlap, for example, the Korean jeogori, close the same way.