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Fire or Fashion

Japanese Firemen's Coats of the 19th Century from the Steven and Jacqueline Mayro Strelitz Collection

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Joe Nickols

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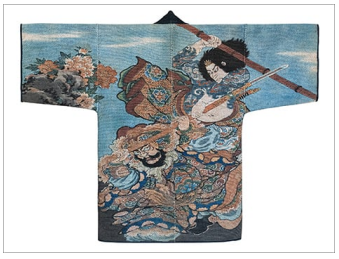
- A must for those interested in Japanese fashion
- Featuring previously unseen pieces
- Lavishly illustrated

An old Japanese saying claims that 'fights and fires are the flowers of Edo'. In Edo, the pre-1868 name for Tokyo, traditional wooden townhouses regularly suffered devastating blazes. Other densely populated areas of Japan experienced similar fates, but Edo stood out as a 'City of Fires'. Against this backdrop, the firefighter became a heroic figure, with a uniform to match.

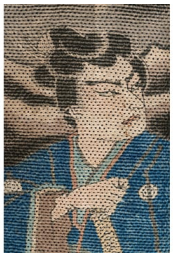
This book celebrates the hikeshi-banten reversible coats worn by Japan's firefighters in the 19th century. These garments were made of thick, quilted cotton that could be soaked in water to protect the wearer from the flames. While the exterior would often be a plain indigo, the interior would be intricately decorated in the tsutsugaki dyeing technique. Dramatic depictions from Japanese legends, sometimes signed by renowned artists of the period, added to the dashing effect.

The superb pieces in this publication are drawn from one of the world's largest collections of hikeshi-banten. Essays by leading scholars in the Japanese field provide context and reveal that these jackets were probably as much about fashion as fighting fires.

Etsuko Iwanaga is the director of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Her curatorial practice is focused on textile art in Asia and Japan.
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