Abstract
This research examines the use of hair ornaments in Japan between the 18th to 20th centuries to craft a wearer’s identity. It details the process of creating a lacquered comb using traditional carving and lacquering techniques and seeks to explain how Japan’s economy—particularly during the nation’s isolation and opening—affected hair ornaments’ manufacture and wear. It references objects in the Scripps College Collections, collected over decades by the late Angelyn Riffenburgh and presented to the College by her husband, Dr. Ralph Riffenburgh, in 2012.

Introduction and Background
Western jewelry—rings, bracelets, and necklaces—were traditionally not worn in Japan. Instead, Japanese women of all classes decorated their hair with combs (kushi), bodkins (kogai), and pronged hairpins (kanzashi). Like silk kimono, these ornaments were one of a kind; the women who wore them carefully considered their color, shape, material, decoration, and hair placement when completing an outfit. Beginning in the 7th century, Japan’s upper classes emulated the Chinese system of color-coded headdresses to discern among court ranks; by the 9th century, a culture specific to Japan had emerged, though social hierarchies continued to define hairstyles and dress. The nuanced tradition of Japanese coiffure reached its peak, not only in popularity but also in technical achievement, during the Edo period (1603-1868). However, the opening of Japan to the West during the Meiji Restoration in 1868 introduced Western fashions to Japanese culture. Though combs continued to be made—some in Western shapes—some Japanese women eschewed traditional hairstyles in favor of less time-demanding Western ones. The art of hair decoration is key in any discussion of Japanese women’s historical fashion, and thus, modes of expression. As the Japanese equivalent of Western jewelry, hair ornaments offer unique insight into Japan’s cultural and social history, particularly the Edo, Meiji, and modern periods.

Creating a Lacquered Comb
While the oldest forms of hair combs date to the early Stone Age (c. 10,000 BCE), it was not until the end of the 17th century that economic prosperity and technological advances in cosmetics allowed the art of Japanese coiffure to develop the rich variety of designs valued today. Visiting the collections of Japanese lacquer at the Los Angeles County Museum of Arts (LACMA), the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford, and to the Getty Center revealed that many of the techniques and designs used to create hair ornaments in the Scripps College Collection are identical to those used for larger lacquered items, such as storage containers, eating vessels, and inro, a type of small case worn suspended around the waist.

Creating these luxury goods was an incredibly time-consuming process requiring much skill and patience. With the exception of certain factories in Okinawa, hair ornaments were commissioned and produced in cottage industries in a process involving perhaps 15-20 different specialists (Goodall). Kushi, kogai, and kanzashi were most commonly made of wood or tortoiseshell and decorated using precious metals, lacquer, and mother of pearl. The Scripps College collection features examples of all of these, as well as modern combs made of ivory (2013.7.39), bone (2013.7.51), and even etched crystal (2013.7.49). Artists have also used horse
hoof as an inexpensive alternative that resembles tortoiseshell (Wolfgram). In modern times, copies are mass-produced in plastic.

The material of choice for a lacquered wooden comb, Japanese yellow boxwood, is very hard and fine-grained. The tree is found in southern Japan and takes 20-30 years to reach the sufficient diameter. Once the wood is ready, it is cut into 4-6 inch lengths; sliced across the circular face into sections, not unlike a cake’s wedges; then smoothed and polished using a plane. The wood was then smoked and cured over a period of 5-10 years in the sun, then an oven, then in storage to prevent warping (Goodall). To cut the teeth, craftsmen used fine saws. “An angled cut was made from each side towards the base, and a third cut was made between the two…when all the teeth had been made by this tedious and delicate method, files covered with shark skin or a special type of dried grass eliminated the rough spots on and between the teeth” (Ziesnitz and Lester). Though wooden combs with the most exquisite grains were polished and finished at this point, most were then prepared for the lacquering process.

Lacquerware’s tough surface, resistant to everything except light and dryness, has been prized for centuries across continents. Its high cost stems from difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming production. As art historian Hollis Goodall explains:

“The process begins with the lacq tree, which takes 25 years to grow and dies when its lacq is harvested. To obtain the raw lacq, workers scarify the tree as one would a rubber tree, which then exudes raw lacq into a waiting container. The lacq is filtered repeatedly, reducing its volume. As raw lacq and its fumes are highly toxic, the substance must be handled carefully.” (Goodall)

Traditional Japanese methods dictated that an object to be lacquered receive 33 preparatory undercoats. Next, artists applied countless thin layers of lacquer, setting the ornament aside to cure in a high humidity cabinet in between each layer. Throughout the Edo period, Japanese artisans honed techniques for applying various sizes of gold flakes and granules and building up layers of lacquer, resulting in creative designs and textures. The most frequently found are: hiramaki, flat granules of gold placed on a black background; nashiji, dusting metallic powders and shapes to create a surface resembling pear skin; taka-maki, lacquer built up in layers to create raised surfaces; tsuki-gake, lacquer combed with a needle to create sinuous curves resembling water; and kiri-kane, gold leaf cut into lines and shapes resembling decorated paper (Goodall).

The designs produced vary widely and draw from all aspects of Japanese life.

Creating the Coiffure

Professional hairdressers practiced in their own shops or paid visits to private homes. The hair was washed, and then combed to a shine using boxwood combs soaked in aloë wood pomade or camellia oil. Between appointments, women slept on padded headrests so as to preserve her coiffure. These headrests might include a small drawer for incense to scent her hair as she slept (Morrison and Price).

A woman’s age, marital status, and social class were the key factors in determining which of the thirty-six most common hairstyles would be chosen. Married women tended to wear the maru-mage (round chignon); unmarried women, the shimada-mage (a hair loop style invented by women of Shimada Station on the Tokkaido Road); and young girls, the icho gaeshi or chocho-mage (butterfly chignon) (Ziesnitz and Lester). The hairstyle of choice determined the number and placement of combs, bodkins, and pins.

Like kimono, hair ornaments were selected carefully according to the time of year and the particular event. These ornaments expressed one’s personal tastes, enhanced fashionable outfits, displayed wealth and social status, and alluded to literary and artistic knowledge. The
subject matter of the decoration might feature a famous Shinto site (2013.7.45); a kamon (family crest); one of 54 branch-like symbols referencing a specific chapter of the *Tales of Genji*; a popular textile pattern; or scenes from the countryside and nature. Plants, insects, and animals were common seasonal motifs. Birds often signified spring; ivy and grasses were worn in the fall. It is important to note that poetry, not actual blooming times, defined the seasons in fashion (Wolfgram). Warm colors were worn during the winter and cool colors during the summer (Coats). By matching the motifs on hair ornaments to those found on her clothing, a woman created harmonious compositions in her dress and signaled her artistic talent to others.

**Changing Styles**

**Kogai**

In the early Edo period, women wrapped their hair around a bodkin or ornamental bar (kogai) to stabilize ornate hairstyles. Single-piece bars were functional and held together a chignon. The kogai was often sold with matching combs and hairpins as part of a set. During the mid- to late Edo period, kogai became less functional; the two-piece kogai was simply intended for decoration. Instead, thick black paper was used as an internal support for the fantastically elaborate styles (Morrison and Price).

**Shapes**

Comb shapes and sizes vary widely. The most common shapes are a half-moon, a horseshoe, and a rectangle. The length of the teeth and height of the breast (the section bearing most of the ornamentation) define how high the comb will sit on the wearer’s hair. Throughout the Edo period, the breast grew taller and taller, inspired by bold innovations in fashion from the dynamic urban areas of Kyoto and Edo; after the Meiji restoration and the opening of Japan to the West in 1868, Japanese fashion absorbed Western influences. Combs began to use Western-style shapes, and hair ornaments were replaced with Western-style hats and hair dos, but it was not until the end of World War II that traditional Japanese coiffure truly went out of fashion.

**Emergence of a New Consumer Base**

Prior to the Edo period, Japan was in a state of social and political turmoil and almost constant military conflict. The elite samurai class, which included shoguns, daimyo, and samurai, justified their social supremacy and earned income on the basis of their military service. They were barred from supporting themselves through commerce or farming, as these areas were considered peasant work (Ginsberg 108). In addition to their military prowess, samurai prided themselves on their literary and artistic achievements, particularly in the fields of poetry, calligraphy, and brush painting.

However, after Tokugawa Ieyasu unified Japan and military service became a lesser priority, the status regulations that defined the samurai class’ rank and behavior impeded their financial advance. While political insulation and the growth of Japan’s urban-based economy during the 17th and 18th centuries led to improved material well being and living standards for most Japanese, the samurai, whose stipends were fixed in the 17th century and paid in rice, experienced relative economic stagnation. Many merchants and artisans’ incomes, buoyed by the growth of domestic commerce, grew more rapidly than that of an ordinary samurai (McClain 121). To make matters worse, some samurai stipends were cut by as much as 50 percent in the 19th century to reduce struggling daimyos’ growing budget deficits (McClain 121). Scholar James McClain writes,

> “Many samurai families…ripped the shrubbery from their gardens in order to plant plums, apples, and apricots for sale in the city’s markets…70 percent or more of samurai
households set up home workshops or worked part time in merchant and artisan shops. With increasing frequency, many once-proud warriors pawned their swords and armor, sent daughters away to work as household servants, or even resorted to infanticide in order to fend off a slide into poverty.” (McClain 120)

Politics of Consumption

The consumption patterns of newly wealthy merchants caused Japanese performing arts, literary culture, and fashion to flourish. Towards the late Edo period, coiffures became increasingly ornamental and elaborate, using more twists and internal supports to form hair into fantastic shapes, more ornaments to adorn the hair, and more elaborate designs as artisans developed new lacquering techniques. Unfortunately, the decadence also led to social tensions between the nouveau riche merchant class and the elite samurai. As Sharon Ziesnitz and Gerd Lester explain in *Arts of Asia*,

“The highly acclaimed martial accomplishments of the samurai gave way to cultural refinement. In an effort to maintain their opulent standard of living, the hereditary nobility lost economic power by becoming heavily indebted to an increasingly wealthy merchant class that used some of its riches to acquire art, and through it prestige.” (Ziesnitz and Lester)

However, McClain believes that “in some measure, the samurai’s sense of growing impoverishment was psychological” (McClain 121), as some samurai were still able to “become such gourmands that the daimyo feared they might lose their martial spirit” and “hold lavish parties” (McClain 71). Regardless, warriors resented wealthy merchants’ ability to afford the most desirable consumer goods at a time they themselves no longer could and mourned the perceived loss of “a lifestyle appropriate to their elite status” (McClain 121). Though the samurai were the “only class allowed to wield two swords or choose between four and thirteen varieties of silk to wear, the despised merchant class had the cash” (Ginsberg 108).

As a result, the jealous samurai class sought to “enforce the concept of rule by status” (McClain 70) by using their political influence to back a series of sumptuary laws—edicts regulating consumption on the basis of class. Because hair ornaments and hairstyles were used to define one’s identity and status, ordinances defined their appropriate use in detail.

“Coral, which was banned at one time, was coolly called tortoiseshell. When gold and silver were banned, extremely elaborate woodcarvings with movable sections were set within combs to catch passing glances…Kanzashi and kogai were often given a scooped end so that when they had to bypass stringent laws, as in 1720, they could be proclaimed ‘portable’ ear cleaners or scalp scratchers—rather a stretch of the imagination as often thick clusters of gilded butterflies and blossoms fluttered from the ends of these hairpins.” (Ziesnitz and Lester)

McClain argues that these sumptuary laws had a limited effect overall. “Disobedience was not uncommon…[An observer of 19th century life in Edo wrote,] ‘the shogun’s proclamations are called ‘three-day laws’. No one fears them, and no one pays any attention to them. They are disregarded after that short period of time’” (McClain 71).

As discussed earlier in this paper, the opening of Japan to the West during the Meiji Restoration in 1868 introduced Western fashions to Japanese culture and resulted in some combs being made with a Western shape (2013.7.51, 2013.7, 2013.7.60). However, one might argue that the Japanese impact on European fashion was greater, as examples of the Japanese aesthetic in Europe and America “subsequently led to a craze for all things Japanese…Kimono were exported to the West, and by the 1870s were available to buy in shops such as Liberty's in
London” (Victoria & Albert Museum). For the first time, many hair ornaments were made for export to foreign audiences in countries such as Spain, Portugal, England, and America. The Japanese described such objects for export as being made in the Nanban (foreign barbarian) style (Goodall). These objects often featured large inlays of mother of pearl and had little to no preparative undercoating, resulting in a less time-consuming piece to produce with more immediate visual impact.

**Conclusion**

Scholarly research on Japanese lacquer tends to focus on larger objects: figurative sculptures, serving trays and vessels, storage containers, and the like. But just as much information can be had from kushi, kogai, and kanzashi. Because Japanese hair ornaments were created and worn to complement kimono, their design reflects significant changes in Japanese fashions and thus, modes of expression. Their decoration carried important messages about wearers’ identity. Though many examples of fine Japanese hair ornaments exist in personal collections around the world, relatively little is known about the artisans who created them or the women who wore them. Further research might explore the cottage industries and small workshops that produced these stunning miniature works of art, or analyze the ornaments’ decoration in tandem with literary developments in poetry.

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**Works Cited**

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