

Object in focus: Man's banyan

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This is a banyan which is a man's nightgown for informal wear at home, made in Europe from imported silk damask, 1720s-30s. A banyan of this style is a wide, loose garment, open at centre front, with wide sleeves. The blue silk damask was woven in China for import into Europe and is similar to a silk damask used for furnishing.¹ The length of the repeat is 126.5 cms. It is longer than in other kimono-shaped banyans with 46 to 64cms being more usual and suggests that this silk might have been intended for furnishing but was also suitable for this banyan. The full width of the silk is used across the back. **Plate: T.31-2012**

The term *banyan* came from a word in Gujerati for a Hindu merchant or trader, in the province of Gujerat, India. The anglicised form of the word was mentioned as early as about 1599.² It came to be applied to the dress that Europeans erroneously thought that such traders wore.³ The loose style of this banyan is based on the Japanese kimono; the so-called 'Japanese gowns' that were first brought by tradesmen of the Dutch East India Company (founded in 1602) to the Netherlands. In that country, the nightgown soon gained popularity.⁴ The Shogun gave these garments to the directors of the United East India Company at yearly audiences. The presentation of thirty of these silk gowns re-established the trade agreement between the Shogun and the Company so that it covered another year. This is likely to have been in the 1640s when the trade to Japan and China was the most important business of the Dutch East India Company. The only silks that the Company brought back from Japan in 1648-50 were

¹ Browne, Clare: 'Silk Damask Bed Furnishings in the Early Eighteenth Century – Influences on Choice in Colour and Designs', In Anna Jolly (ed.), *Furnishing Textiles. Studies on Seventeenth- and Eighteenth- Century Interior Decoration*, Riggisberger Berichte, Abegg-Stiftung, 2009, p. 47–58, fig.29.

² Hakluyt, Richard: *The principal navigations, voyages, traffiques and discoveries of the English nation*, New ed., 1598-1600 (3 vols.), London: G. Bishop, R. Newberie and R. Barker, Oxford English Dictionary <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15222?redirectedFrom=banyan#eid28123163> accessed 20/1/2012.

³ Ribeiro, Aileen: *A Visual History of Costume. The Eighteenth Century*, London: Batsford, 1983, p.142.

⁴ Nienholdt, E.: 'Der Schlafrock', *Waffen und Kostümkunde*, Heft 2, (1967), pp.105-116.

a single parcel of Japanese kimonos.⁵ These might have been the ones presented by the Shogun. The kimonos were often modelled on the 'T'-shaped cut of the Japanese *kosode* with a shawl collar and wide, short sleeves. So few arrived each year that their rarity made them desirable and they signified elevated status.⁶ The aristocrat, Jan Six (1618–1700) stated that 'June 1689 was so cold that we had to don our winter underwear with braziers at table and Japanese dress coats.'⁷ Elsewhere in the Far East, Chinese potters in Canton made portrait figures of Europeans wearing banyans of the kimono style. An example of such a portrait figure shows a European gentleman reclining on a couch and wearing what would be an ankle-length kimono-style banyan fastened to the left side. **Plate: FE.24:1-1999.**

The vogue for exotica had started in Britain with the foundation of the Honourable East India Company and was enhanced by travellers' accounts and letters in the eighteenth century and 'nightgowns were part of this trend.'⁸ The English East India Company, founded in 1601, traded mainly with India and China. The import of silk piece goods from China peaked at 39,133 in 1739.⁹ In seventeenth-century England, banyans soon gained popularity. By the 1670s English tailors were making kimono-style banyans from fashionable European silks. An early 'T'-shaped example was made from a British silk in 1707–20. **Plate: T.281-1983.**

Banyans could be made from linen, cotton or wool, some calendered to make them shiny like silk, as well as silk damask or brocaded silk. There were at least five London gown warehouses that specialized in morning gowns, another name for banyans, by the 1730s. They sold ready-made garments for the wealthy rather than the poorer middling sort.¹⁰ The popularity of banyans spread throughout Europe, this portrait of about 1670 depicts a young Frenchman in his brocaded silk banyan. **Plate: P.68-1917.**

⁵ Glamann, Kristof: *Dutch-Asiatic trade, 1620–1740*, Dutch Science Press, Copenhagen, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1958, p.57 and 137.

⁶ du Mortier, Bianca: *Aristocratic Attire: The donation of the Six family*, Koenig, Ruth: translated, Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, Waanders Publishers, 2000), p.35.

⁷ Jan Six quoted in du Mortier, Bianca: *Aristocratic Attire*, p.35.

⁸ Fennetaux, Ariane: 'Men in gowns: Nightgowns and the construction of masculinity in eighteenth-century England,' *immediations: The Research Journal of the Courtauld Institute of Art*, no.1, (Spring, 2004), p.77–89.

⁹ Chaudhuri, K. N.: *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660–1760*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, Appendix 5, p.546.

¹⁰ Lemire, Beverly: *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1997, p.2.

The style of banyans developed from the kimono style to a fitted shape cut like the European coat. The rake who is the centre of attention in this engraving from the series *The Rake's Progress* by William Hogarth is wearing a banyan of the more fitted type with front closures decorated with frogging. **Plate: F.118:28.** Surviving fitted banyans in British collections have button fastenings or those decorated with frogging. They have sleeves shaped to the arm and cuffs with buttons. In addition, some fitted banyans have waistcoat fronts attached that are visible when the banyan is opened. Examples of fitted banyans are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the National Museums of Scotland, Buckinghamshire County Museum, and the Fashion Museum, Bath.¹¹ The kimono-style banyan seems to have been worn for most of the century. Numerous fitted banyans have a standing collar, which, related to the formal coat, would place them in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹²

The term 'nightgown' was often used instead of 'banyan'. In addition, the term 'Indian gown' may refer to the oriental textile out of which the garment was made; silk or cotton, or to its kimono style.¹³ 'Indian gown' as a term was in use from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century. In his diary, Samuel Pepys recorded sitting to the portrait painter, John Hayls in 1666, 'to Hales's, and there sat till almost quite dark upon working my gowne, which I hired to be drawn in; an Indian gowne.'¹⁴ Twenty-two years later, a bill of 1688-89 in the Woburn accounts of the Earls of Bedford lists details and the price of new Indian gowns and mentions the covering of old ones. The bill originates from Henry Kirke, Indian Gown Seller, Strand, London.¹⁵ In 1713, *The Guardian* reported that 'The Bath countenances the men of dress in shewing themselves at the Pump in their Indian night-gowns without the least decorum.'¹⁶

There are records of the term 'banyan' being used throughout the eighteenth century in Britain. Early use includes the mention of a destroyed garment in 1725, 'I

¹¹ V&A: Inv.1182-1899; National Museums of Scotland: Inv. K.2002.1041; Inv. K.2002.496; Buckinghamshire County Museum: Inv.1948.48.1.1; Fashion Museum, Bath: Inv.BATMC.92.146; Inv. BATMC II.16.3.

¹² Buck, Anne: *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, London: Batsford, 1979, p.46.

¹³ *ibid*, p.46.

¹⁴ Lord Braybrooke, Richard: (ed.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys, F.R.S. Secretary to the Admiralty in the Reigns of Charles II and James II*, London: George Routledge & Sons, 1906, p.381. The portrait is in the National Portrait Gallery, London: Inv. 211.

¹⁵ Swain, Margaret H.: 'Nightgown into Dressing Gown, A Study of Mens' (sic) Nightgowns Eighteenth Century', *Costume*, no.6, 1972, p.10-21.

¹⁶ Cunnington, Cecil Willett and Cunnington, Phillis: *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century*, London: Faber & Faber, 1957, p.73.

have lost nothing by it but a banyan shirt, a corner of my quilt, and my bible singed'¹⁷ A witness to a riot in London in 1736 described one of the rioters as being dressed 'in a striped Banjan'.¹⁸ In 1755, Samuel Johnson published the definition of the word 'Bannian'.¹⁹ In London in 1764, a trade card from the Golden Lion in Tavistock Street advertised ready-made 'Gentlemen's Banyans, Gowns & Caps'.²⁰ As late as 1785, the word for the still fashionable garment continued to be in use, as London's *Town and Country Magazine* reported 'banyans are worn in every part of the town from Wapping to Westminster.'²¹

Banyans were worn over unbuttoned waistcoats or shirts, with or without neckcloths, breeches unfastened at the knee, and sometimes undone stockings. Wigs were removed and fashionable nightcaps put on shaven heads. Slippers replaced shoes. The portrait figure of the European gentleman originally had a nightcap, now missing, and he wears a neckcloth, shirt, and slippers. **Plate: FE.24:1-1999.** In this sculpture of Handel by Louis François Roubiliac, the composer wears a banyan and nightcap, his waistcoat and breeches are unbuttoned and one foot rests on a discarded slipper. **Plate: A.3-1965.**

The diversity of society was reflected in where men wore banyans; those in elite society wore them in private. A banyan might even have been intended to be worn ensuite with a furnished room. A toilet set at Ham House, associated with the wedding of the 4th Earl of Dysart in 1729 includes a banyan with matching slippers of the same blue silk and silver tissue as some table covers, mirror cloths and other accessories.²² Whereas elite men were often shown in portraits wearing their banyans whilst studying in their libraries, professional men in the middling ranks of society, wore them at work in private

¹⁷ Harleian Misc. Vii. 297 (D.) quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p.928.

¹⁸ 'Robert Page, William Orman Rod, Thomas Putrode, Breaking the Peace: Riot, Breaking the Peace, Assault, 13 Oct 1736. The Proceedings of the Old Bailey Ref: t17361013-5,' 'Sessions Text', http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/html_units/1730s/t17361013-5.html, p.2, accessed November, 2004.

¹⁹ Johnson, Samuel: *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755, reprint, Arno Press, New York, 1979, n.p. quoted in Fortune, Brandon Brame: ' "Studious Men are Always Painted in Gowns" ', Charles William Peale's *Benjamin Rush* and the Question of banyans in Eighteenth-Century Anglo-American Portraiture', *Dress*, Vol.29 (2002), p.27-40.

²⁰ Banks Collection, British Museum cited in Ribeiro, Aileen, *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe, 1715-1789*, London: Batsford, 1984, p.26.

²¹ Quotation in Cunningham and Cunningham, *Handbook*, p.219 cited in B. B. Fortune, ' "Studious Men" ', p.29.

²² Browne, Clare: 'Silk Damask Bed Furnishings,' p.52; The 4th Earl and his banyan are discussed and portraits of himself and his wife, banyan, and slippers are illustrated in Thunder, Moira: *An Investigation into Masculinities and Nightgowns in Britain, 1659-1763*, unpublished MA dissertation, University of Southampton, 2005, figs. 37-41.

or in public. At ease in his banyan, Pepys worked on the accounts of the Tangier Committee when he was its Treasurer in 1665

Up, and in my nightgown, cap, and neckcloth,
undressed all day long; lost not a minute, but in
my chamber setting my Tanger accounts to rights²³

John Smith, mezzotinter, wore a banyan and nightcap for his portrait. **Plate: 22100.**

A shipping merchant, in a painting by A. C. Hauck, was depicted seated in his office in a shipping merchant's establishment wearing a banyan and slippers, his tricorne hat the only concession to public space.²⁴ Captain Tom the Barber, who was probably a barber-surgeon, rioted in the street in his banyan.²⁵ His profession required freedom of movement and thought. That the comfort of the banyan was thought to free and stimulate the mind was explained in a lecture in 1790 by Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, who studied medicine in Edinburgh

Loose dresses contribute to the easy and vigorous exercise of the mind. This remark is so obvious, and so generally known, that we find studious men are always painted in gowns [...] Sometimes an open collar, and loose shoes and stockings form a part of their picture²⁶

The *kosode* was worn by Japanese men and women. However, by about the 1650s the pattern of the textile came to signify gender.²⁷ Both genders wore banyans in Britain. An example of a woman's banyan, in green damask, altered in the 1750s or 1760s, that shows traditional shaping at the back and sides for a woman's gown, is in the V&A.²⁸
Plate: T.92-2003.

²³ Latham, R. and Mathews, W.: (eds.) *The Diary of Samuel Pepys. A Selection from The diary of Samuel Pepys, a new and complete transcription*, London: Penguin Classics, 2003, p.509.

²⁴ A. C. Hauck, *Interior of a shipping merchant's establishment*, probably Rotterdam, 1783, watercolour, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation illustrated in Fortune, Brandon Brame: "Studious Men [...]", figure 3.

²⁵ Robert Page, William Orman Rod, Thomas Putrode, *Breaking the Peace: Riot, Breaking the Peace, Assault*, p.2.

²⁶ Rush, Benjamin: 'On the influence of Physical Causes in Promoting an Increase of the Strength and Activity of the Intellectual Faculties of Man' *In Two Essays on the Mind*, Carlson, Eric (introd.), New York: Brunner/ Mazel, 1972 quoted in Fortune, Brandon Brame: "Studious Men [...]"

²⁷ Cort, Louise, Allison: 'Whose Sleeves...? Gender, Class and Meaning in Japanese Dress of the Seventeenth Century', *In* Barnes, Ruth and Eicher, Joanne B: *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning*, (Berg Publishers, Oxford, 1993), p.183-197.

²⁸ Woman's banyan, T.92-2003 bought with the support from the Friends of the V&A, Raymond Burton, Esq. and the Mercers' Company.

However, far from the convention of gender-specific patterns for Japanese *kosode*, there is evidence that textiles from women's gowns, which had long panels of uncut fabric, could be re-used and made into men's banyans. The remains of the original pleats from a woman's garment are still evident in a textile that was re-used to make a man's banyan.²⁹ Both men and women wore banyans in private and recent historiography indicated that an enquiry into the banyan within marriage using gender historical and cultural studies approaches is a promising area of future research.³⁰

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²⁹ Baumgarten, Linda: 'Altered Historical Clothing', *Dress*, no.25, 1998, p.42-57 cited in A. Fennetaux, 'Men in gowns' p.77-89.

³⁰ Thunder, Moira: 'Introduction: Historiography and Methodology' *In An Investigation into Masculinities*, p.6-31