

## Amamonzeki: Imperial Convents

Before the Meiji period, imperial convents, known as “palace nunneries” for their unique culture, were headed by abbesses who were daughters of emperors and high-ranking aristocrats. Due to their connection with the imperial court, these convents preserve numerous treasures presented to them from the imperial household and religious institutions. The convents also preserve intangible traditions, palace language, and special yearly events.



Photo: The altar in the Buddha Hall of Daishōji hung with altar cloths and a curtain made from one of Shōken Kōtaigō's Japanese-style court costumes.

## Daishōji Imperial Convent, Kyoto

Daishōji Imperial Convent has had a long succession of princess abbesses serving the way of Buddha. When the convent receives donations of textiles or garments, they convert the secular into the sacred by taking them apart and refashioning them into altar decorations enhancing the worship area. Adorning the altar with these cloths serves as prayers and memorials. In 1911 the Empress presented the taireifuku to the convent. In order to remake it into altar cloths, the nuns cut the train in half and gave each square of fabric a new lining inscribed with the date (Meiji 44, early summer), donor, and an indication that the two altar cloths were a gift to Daishōji. At some time after that, the two altar cloths, with their inscribed linings, were stitched back together to recreate the train, which was given pleats and a waist sash.

## Project for Research, Conservation, and Reproduction of Shōken Kōtaigō's Taireifuku

As a part of her vision of modernization, Shōken Kōtaigō came to promote Western attire, while advocating the importance of the Japanese silk industry. This is the oldest extant Western-style taireifuku belonging to Shōken Kōtaigō, and thus stands as an important historical resource symbolizing the Meiji-period modernization, her encouragement of industry, the social changes these incurred, and the political role of the empress. In the late Meiji period, she donated the gown to Daishōji Imperial Convent, where it has been carefully preserved. Today the fabric and beautiful embroidery of this valuable historical garment show signs of deterioration that require immediate and appropriate conservation. The purpose of this project, established in 2018, is to research and conserve the taireifuku so that the taireifuku, and knowledge of the world it symbolizes, can be passed on to future generations.

### Where and when was the taireifuku made and worn?

#### When

From the style and certain documentary pointers, the date of this court costume is thought to be sometime between 1888 (after her first taireifuku that was made in Germany in 1886) and the very early 1890s. The bodice comes to a point in front and back, where is its laced up, and rises over the hips. The sleeves are wider under the arm than at the overlapping shoulders.



The empress wore a taireifuku for the New Years reception of dignitaries including foreign ambassadors and their wives. There is also a possibility this taireifuku may have been worn for the promulgation of the constitution in February 1889, as two Germans who attended, Dr. Baelz and Ottmar von Mohl, noted her “rose-colored” gown with train.

The inscription on the altar cloths:

“From the Empress, Meiji 44 (1911) early summer, Gifted to Daishōji.”

A letter dated 7-7-1909 details the gift. So the date in the inscription indicates when the train was remade into two altar cloths.



#### Where?

##### Textile

This remains a riddle. The motif of roses and the weave structure are European in origin though also known in Japan. European specialists have all pointed to Japanese production as they have found no equivalent fabrics in their archives. The complexity of the design, however, was impossible to weave with the simplified Jacquard mechanisms used in Japan before the late Meiji period. If produced in Japan, it was probably woven on a draw loom.

##### Tailoring

Although the empress is known to have ordered dresses from Europe, documents also attest to her using a local tailor. Details in the tailoring and specifically the thread used to sew the garment indicate a Japanese production.

##### Embroidery

The metallic threads may have been imported from France, but the embroidery itself was done in Japan with Japanese methods, including backing the embroidery with reused Japanese washi papers.