Family history woven in kimono exhibit
Kimono exhibit also recalls some bittersweet memories

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Like mothers throughout the ages, Yukino Omori Tsuboi put special effort into making clothes for her five daughters.

The kimono she crafted each year were not only works of fabric art; they were ties to the land she had left in 1913 to immigrate to Portland.

Many of these graceful garments now hang at the Willamette Heritage Center in “The Art and Tradition of Kimono.” It’s the final exhibit in a year dedicated to women, celebrating the centennial of women’s suffrage in Oregon. Kimono, which means “something to wear” in Japanese society, has roots that trace back to the seventh century CE. Between the 17th and mid-19th centuries, men and women alike wore the garments daily.

Since World War II, Western dress has become the norm in Japan. Kimono are reserved for special occasions, such as weddings.

Kiyoko Tsuboi Taubkin, one of the daughters of Masaichi and Yukino Tsuboi, kept her mother’s handiwork. Thanks to her, heritage-center visitors can admire such pieces as an elegant forest-green garment with black, yellow and salmon floral figures and a ultra-simple cream-colored silk, light enough to wear on the hottest summer days.

But those who remember history will realize that the story has a bittersweet ending.

Like most Japanese Americans on the West Coast, Taubkin’s family was forced to relocate to an internment camp during World War II. After the war, with no special ties to Portland, the parents and daughters scattered across the nation.

After Taubkin’s death in 2009, the kimono collection and other objects passed to the Oregon Nikkei Endowment. The exhibit came to the Heritage Center as a partnership with the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center.

Keni Sturgeon, the exhibit’s curator, said the show is a fine match on many levels. As examples of expert weaving, the kimono relate to the historic woolen mill whose story the heritage center tells. And they evoke the Japanese-American culture that flourished in Oregon, including the Salem area, until World War II.

“We were looking for fiber arts that told a deeper story,” Sturgeon said. “There is a real story behind (the kimono) that really resonates with the Japanese community in Oregon.”

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