

Luxury in Fashion Reconsidered

Akiko Fukai

Chief Curator

The Kyoto Costume Institute

1. What is luxury?

Many people claim they are only interested in clothes that are “super basic.” However, even such people have clear preferences, and choose to wear clothing that reflects the seasonal or social context. The act of putting on clothes transcends the primary level of human existence and represents a life of choices not simply dictated by survival.

The act of “wearing” has always played an insignificant role in actual human survival, even in primitive societies; instead, clothing was the consequence of surplus, and was used to differentiate. To wear clothing is a most familiar and personal act for humans. It is also a social act, and remains the most effective means of differentiating ourselves from others. There has always been a strong relationship between fashion and luxury, and this relationship continues today, as it surely will in the future.

In recent years, the pursuit of luxury within the context of prosperous capitalism has been attracting a great deal of attention here in Japan and internationally. Society is undergoing a dramatic transformation at a speed that no one anticipated. The radical sensibility represented by today’s fashion is arguably revealing a new aspect of luxury that at the same time is pointing society in a new direction.

Before I go any further, let’s look at the etymology of the word “luxury.” Both the English and French words originate from the Latin word “luxus” which means “abundance” or “sumptuousness,” but also carries nuances of “branching off,” or “differing from the norm.” The term has been adapted into the Japanese language, and is gradually gaining recognition in the Japanese vernacular.

In response to the question “What is luxury?” Philippe Perrot, in his essay “Luxury in History” in this catalogue, explores what constitutes the essence of luxury, and discusses the transformation in the concept of luxury in the West over the centuries. I intend to examine luxury from the perspective of fashion. Perrot’s essay recognizes that luxury represents “the surplus produced by a prosperous society,” and that luxury “is a symbol of an intrinsic differentiation.” These concepts apply to all ages, societies and cultural regions, and have enormous significance vis-à-vis fashion.

Economic historian Werner Sombart claimed that luxury represents “the expense of something that is beyond necessity”¹ arguing that whether a product is essential or not is determined by a subjective value judgment (ethical, aesthetic, or anything else for that matter) and an objective yardstick (determining its psychological or cultural worth to humans). Luxury is not restricted to

the monetary or material, but can include even the spiritual, and is measured by something that is expressly relative.

Luxury in Fashion Reconsidered features garments from the 17th Century to the present time that explore the keyword “luxury.” These garments have been removed from their respective time frames and are presented from a contemporary perspective, underpinned by a certain commonality, a visual or qualitative characteristic that transcends temporal and social context. These can be categorized into distinct groups, and the exhibition, *Luxury in Fashion Reconsidered*, has been divided into four sections that represent these groupings: (1) Ostentation, (2) Less is more, (3) Clothes are free-spirited, and (4) Uniqueness.

Detailed information about the individual sections is provided by the explanations that cover each section. In this essay, however, I would like to consider the relationship between luxury and fashion, and the social background that forms the basis of this relationship.

2. From ostentation to an intellectual game

In many societies, the most obvious manifestations of luxury in fashion are examples that convey concepts such as ostentation, glamour, lavishness, and elegance. The rare and lavish bodice made for Queen Elizabeth 1 (Cat. no.1) is an example of luxury used to parade authority and power, while the flamboyant clothing worn by male and female members of the 18th-Century nobility flaunted economic and financial surplus in an overtly ostentatious manner. As suggested by Blaise Pascal who wrote in his 17th century *Pensées* that “To adorn is to convey one’s power,”² luxury was clearly used to convey class differentiation.

By the end of the 19th Century, sociologist Thorstein Veblen claimed that in a capitalist society, “what we wear is always clearly understood, and all observers can know, in a single glance, what one’s monetary status is.”³ His words reveal an increasingly close relationship between high fashion and monetary value. This is why the dresses at House of Worth, which represented the pinnacle of Parisian haute couture in the mid- and late- 19th Century, had to be costly. Cost amplified the prestige of the brand’s tacit value. For ladies of the 19th-Century upper class, clothing was the easiest means of conveying privilege, or of displaying one’s position, assets and power. If capitalist society today remains fundamentally unchanged from that at the end of the 19th Century, then this statement would therefore be equally valid today.

Essentially, regardless of the times, clothing has always conveyed the message of monetary wealth. Before the 20th Century, luxury was manifested by what was perceived to be lavish, rare, costly, or indicative of prosperity, and any clothing that suggested physical work was eschewed. Heading the list of luxury items was jewelry; other examples included elaborate brocade silk fabrics or intricate lace used in clothing, delicate silk shoes, or pure white linen undergarments. Sumptuary laws were enacted throughout the centuries by those in power to limit access to luxury goods such as clothing and jewelry.

Today, however, luxury is no longer restricted to conspicuous consumption or extravagance. Functional sophistication, comfort, individuality, and even spiritual beauty are all important elements of achieving satisfaction, and clearly, luxury today has many faces.

But some of these attitudes emerged as new dimensions of luxury (cf. Perrot) during the 19th Century. Comfort came to be embodied through clothing, and clothing was designed to convey luxury in the form of quality, sophistication, and understatement, effectively heralding a completely new aesthetic.

The dark and practical colors worn by the general public, and the loose lines of the lounge suit manifested in the *sebiro* (business suit) worn by Japanese businessmen today, first appeared in men's clothing during the late 19th Century. In contrast, however, women's clothing was still dominated, even at the beginning of the 20th Century, by the heavily decorative Belle Époque style. It was Paul Poiret who took the bold step of removing this decoration and designing astonishingly simple dresses (Cat. no.36). Fashion was transformed by World War I, and new values in women's fashion were made universal through Coco Chanel's simple knee-length dresses and Madeleine Vionnet's bias cut dresses in the 20th Century, culminating in Yves St Laurent's 1965 Mondrian day dress (Cat. no.58).

The transition from a visible luxury to a luxury not apparent at first glance can also be seen in examples from the past which cover many different genres. According to British art historian Michael Baxandall, before the Renaissance, the price of a painting was determined by the amount of gold and ultramarine used in the work. Gold and ultramarine were extremely expensive materials at the time and this determined the painting's monetary worth. After the Renaissance, however, the extensive use of gold and ultramarine was regarded as less important, and this was substituted by another element – the skill of the artist.⁴

A similar change in attitude can be said to have affected fashion. Eventually, value came to be judged not simply by the amount of silk or decoration used in a garment. There was a growing value attached to the clothing's 'design,' an element that might not immediately be evident to those unable to recognize that the delicate appliqué in Chanel's designs demands a high level of skill, or to those with no interest in the unique cutting techniques employed by Vionnet and Christóbal Balenciaga.

Luxury begins to represent something subtle and intellectual when excessive consumption no longer functions as the sole differentiating factor. This new form of differentiation is represented by originality, one-offs and the concept of 'one's very own' unique creation. Writer Ihara Saikaku demonstrated the sensibility of the ultimate in luxury in Japan during the late 17th Century of the Edo Period (1603-1868). In his novel, *The Man Who Spent His Life in Love*, Yonosuke, the main protagonist, always wears a *kamiko baori* (a *haori* or jacket made from paper). Yonosuke's *haori*, is cleverly created by sewing together paper sheets of authentic calligraphic works by famous poets. However, his competitor Denshichi's *haori* is made by sewing together statements of love from 23 courtesans. The paper *haori* was normally seen as an example of shabby clothing, but in this case, these unique creations were deemed incredibly valuable.⁵ Echoes of this creative challenge can be seen in the adventurous clothing created by Rei Kawakubo and Martin Margiela

3. The adventurous spirit

During the early 1980s, designer Rei Kawakubo and to some extent Yohji Yamamoto became internationally renowned for the *boro* (frayed) look.⁶ Kawakubo has since continued to create what she terms “clothing never seen before” with a clarity and consistency in her vision that is manifested through a carefully considered process. It was Kawakubo who broke the spell of “beauty” and “sophistication” applied by Western aesthetics to fashion.⁷ During the 1990s, the next generation of designers such as Martin Margiela and Helmut Lang followed in Kawakubo’s footsteps, and it is this new direction in fashion, a completely different aesthetic, that has permeated 21st Century fashion.

Kyoto Costume Institute (KCI) holds what is thought to be the world’s largest collection of Kawakubo’s garments, next to that of the designer’s own holdings. Over the years, Kawakubo’s designs have been analyzed by KCI from a number of different perspectives. This exhibition focuses on the elements of originality and an intelligent sense of play in her work, and through garments conveying Rei Kawakubo’s inherent attitude, considers the relationship between originality and luxury in clothing. This will no doubt lead to an examination of what, exactly, “quality”—an important element of luxury—represents.

Engaging the artful and subtle interplay between the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional, Kawakubo’s clothing demands both the intervention and the imagination of the wearer. This is because a subtle trap has been set that has the effect of exciting, or at times exhausting, the wearer because of the complexity of the garment. It represents a process that begins even before the clothing is worn, through to the donning of the garment, and culminates in its final form. Will the wearer fall into the trap or succeed in transcending it?

Kawakubo’s designs during the 80s were characterized by black garments that were described as ‘frayed’ and that comprised two-dimensional, yet unexplainably complex sections. Once worn, the garments hang off the wearer, with sections swaying in complex combinations, the finished form never revealed.

Contemporary artist Tadashi Kawamata, referring to his creative process, made the following statement: “I am not making a bridge. Instead, I’m channeling the idea of a bridge borrowing its existing shape and function, but creating something with a different role.”⁸ Borrowing from Kawamata’s statement, what Kawakubo is attempting to see is not clothing per se. She is instead borrowing the existing shape and function of clothing to create clothing with a different role and this can arguably be described as a liberation of the spirit.

The consequence of Kawakubo’s wide-reaching influence over the 25 years since her first designs appeared in the 1980s is that her designs now may already appear quite familiar to observers.

However, even when placed on a flat surface, Kawakubo’s garments reveal an aspect that has “never been seen before.” A private exhibition featuring the cutting drawings of Kawakubo’s designs made the relationship between the creator and her designs clearer.⁹ To convey a sense of this, *Luxury in Fashion Reconsidered* displays Kawakubo’s garments photographed on a flat

surface, that is, unworn, in order to reveal the relationship between the wearer and the garment, from the perspective of the wearer, as well as to demonstrate the sense of play in Kawakubo's designs.

Kawakubo's unworn garments represent an abstract three-dimensional form that is unique, a hidden three-dimensionality. The garment then evolves into a three-dimensional form with the body through the wearer. There is a subtle interplay between the two dimensional and the three dimensional. When the wearer is made aware of this, she embraces the passion that the creator has directed into the garment, and at the same time is drawn into the intellectual game devised by the designer. Through the act of 'wearing,' the wearer is provoked by the designer and experiences an exuberant moment.

Kawakubo continues to explore clothing "never seen before," and designs clothes that are defined by a spirit of adventure. Kawakubo is well aware that fashion renews itself every season and is always in pursuit of the new, and she works in synchronicity with fashion. Mass production enables many people easy access to what is new, and in order to realize differentiation, one has to constantly achieve something new. This process, or striving for what has never been seen before, is an aspect of modern luxury.

4. The concept of luxury (time)

Belgian designer Martin Margiela has always questioned the demands of the fashion system and has consistently expressed his objection to it. He does this by creating garments that have already been shown, recycling used clothing, and treating new clothing so that it appears to have been used. Margiela's clothes openly criticize fashion's clichéd attitude towards the concept of time.

Margiela designed a jacket made with caps from a variety of bottled drinks that he collected from around the world. He hand-flattened the caps and then coated them in resin (Cat.no.70). Approximately 350 caps, joined by silver and gold metal rings, have been used in each jacket. The process of roaming the world to find, gather and recycle the used caps transforms them into something rare and valuable. This is an example from Margiela's Artisanal Line, the features of which are that the material used in the garment has already played a different role, and that the material is then transformed by its being used in a totally unique way. The process is time-consuming, and the time required to complete the garment—for example, 20 hours or 40 hours—is always recorded on the garment. The reference to time obviously underscores the time-consuming nature of haute couture.

"Artisanal" means hand-crafted. The jacket described above is hand-made, a rare, one-of-a-kind item; even if another jacket of the same shape and style were to be made, the bottle caps used would always be different, thereby ensuring that each jacket would remain the only one of its kind. This runs contrary to the characteristics of our age's highly efficient manufacturing processes, and represents something "individual" that stands in opposition to mass-produced items. In addition, the resurrection of the caps that have already fulfilled their role and have now been given another role clearly conveys Margiela's attitude towards reusing and recycling materials.

Some people might look down on “artisanal” works as pre-modern, the result of labor-intensive, inefficient, and imperfect production. By proposing that we respect the luxury of uniqueness, Margiela questions the contempt with which some view current-day handcrafting techniques. In this sense, Margiela’s work stimulates one to reconsider the essential meaning of luxury.

As we at KCI assembled the “Luxury” exhibition, we realized that these garments, these works, were posing a fundamental question—how should we address the concept of time as it concerns the concept of luxury?

How time-consuming was handwork on clothing during the 18th Century? Although we don’t have precise answers, it’s easy to imagine the numerous hours and consummate skill required to create the dazzling costumes from this period. Both men’s and women’s clothing feature lavish use of gold and silver thread, or sumptuous textiles, with sophisticated and exquisite decorations.

Thorstein Veblen pointed out that clothing of the 19th Century, incorporating elements such as wide skirts and complex decorations, were proof of a leisurely existence, for the very reason that no one wearing such clothing could carry out labor as a means of supporting oneself.¹⁰ In the 19th Century, having leisure showed one possessed social supremacy, elegance and luxury and therefore time was a vital factor then as well.

Social attitudes toward time underwent a change in the 20th Century. Leisure became represented by activities such as travel and sports. Leisure was still perceived as something positive and desirable, but this value gradually lost its prominence as women’s role in society began to undergo a transformation.

Clothing designed by high-end haute-couture designers such as Vionnet, Balenciaga and Christian Dior, while comfortable and functional, also conveys the creativity and skill of the designers themselves as well as the time-consuming labor of those who were physically involved in creating the garments. Once orders were placed, time was required for repeated fittings. Haute couture reached its zenith in the first half of the 20th Century, and up until then garments not only included the name of the couturier or the name of the *maison*, but also the season, the product number, the atelier where the garment was produced and the name of the person in charge of the garment, as well as the time taken to create the garment. Naturally, the *maison* also took the time to record the name of the customer who purchased the product. To this was added the qualitative element of creativity, and this ultimate combination of handwork and time in turn represented the ultimate in luxury.

Ready-made clothing looms as a threat to haute couture, and this is partially because we have seen a change in people’s attitudes towards time. The ability to easily obtain a replica of an haute couture garment could conceivably be considered a new form of luxury were it not for a lurking desire to achieve differentiation. We have been seeking to solve this dilemma by obtaining something new or different for each season’s collection. This cycle has been the driving force behind the fashion system since the 19th Century, has seen the proliferation of ready-to-wear fashions in the second half of the 20th Century, and continues to accelerate.

As I already mentioned, Kawakubo is well aware of the fact that fashion now requires something new each season, and she works in synchronicity with this cycle. She has spent the last 30 years

facing the monumental task of creating a collection every six months while maintaining her high standards, and she does so with an attitude that is committed and uncompromising.

Kawakubo's garments, which are neither couture nor one-offs, should be examined from the perspective of time, and from the earlier-mentioned perspective of handwork as invested time. When Kawakubo's garments are placed on a flat surface and these are observed together with the original patterns, one realizes the extent of her highly creative, intellectual perspective. We discover not only the handwork and time that has gone into the garment until its completion, but we also make a completely different discovery. Kawakubo's garments represent an abstract flow of time that is strongly linked to the concept behind the design. And, the "quality" of the time required to produce Kawakubo's designs is never mediocre.

Margiela, who has been greatly influenced by Kawakubo, is, however, clearly different in the way he views 'fashion time' as dictated by the season. He works in fashion, an area that is completely defined—indeed, restricted by—time, but he turns his back on it. Margiela is interested in the philosophical question—"what is time?" and appears to be searching for an answer through fashion. This concern is evident in his recycling of old clothing in his Artisanal line, and can also be seen in his experiments holding simultaneous shows in different locations, his reproductions from previous collections, and in his installation featuring living organisms.¹¹

Three years after his Paris debut, Margiela presented his 1993 Spring/Summer Paris collection at two shows held simultaneously at two different locations. Bringing to his fashion shows an exploration of dichotomy of the sort sometimes seen in the art world, one of the shows presented only white items, and the other presented only black. Both started at 8:00 p.m. on October 15, 1992. Invited guests were of course unable to attend both shows, but both shows were essential parts of the full collection.

For his 1994 Spring/Summer Paris collection, Margiela took up the theme "Retrospective," showing reproductions modeled on selected items from his previous collections, from his 1989 debut collection to his most recent 1993 Autumn/Winter collection. His stance was that of rejecting the fashion world's unwavering assumption of having to constantly produce new products, and reflected an attempt to break out of the seasonal cycle. He was also seen as endeavoring to introduce a perspective of permanence to counter fashion's constant renewals.

The first solo exhibition by Maison Martin Margiela held in 1997 at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, and later in Japan, featured tiny organisms. White garments were reproduced using designs from earlier Margiela collections, and on these garments bacteria, yeast, and mold were "planted." The garments were then exhibited outdoors. Over time, the living organisms propagated, then dried out, and the changing colors and shapes had the effect of transforming the actual garment that served as the "foundation." At this point, the garment reached completion, and it is this overall kind of process that exemplifies Margiela's work.

Margiela's Artisanal line is his quiet protest against the definition of time today. He is a fierce critic of efficiency. As if announcing that time has always represented luxury, Margiela's production process is almost anachronistic. However, his message is deadly serious, and it strikes at the heart of our habit of being swayed by majority opinions and accepting them without criticism. We

wonder at the dead stock he employs—how it managed to survive instead of being thrown away, how it was found, and the time involved in transforming an outdated wedding dress into a beautifully fitted dress. As a result of encountering the surprises that he offers, we find ourselves examining our previously unquestioning attitude towards production and consumerism.

The approaches seen in these initiatives demonstrate Margiela's underlying attitude to time. Through them, he is gently urging us to reconsider what time represents. I certainly do not disagree that time is absolute, but it is also true to say that time is relative. In today's rapidly changing global environment and society, a reconsideration of what time represents would arguably have a significant effect on the way we live our lives.

5. The ineffectiveness of sumptuary laws

We seem to have a desire to convey superior wealth, power, status, or to convey something about ourselves that is different from others. Clothing has been the most convenient of tools for communicating this desire in physical form, and perhaps it always will be.

However, those in power have often attempted to monopolize this essential desire by introducing laws to ban conspicuous display. In Europe, sumptuary laws were frequently enacted and date back to the Roman Empire, and sumptuary laws were also widely promulgated in China and Japan. Though repeatedly imposed, these laws were usually met with a complete lack of enthusiasm, and more often than not, with little compliance. In effect, legislation was unable to control the desire that everyone has to flaunt and to differentiate oneself from others.

We are moving towards the enjoyment of a more subtle and understated luxury. This is because, as Perrot claims in "Luxury in History," "In our free society, the individual has neither position nor privilege, and yet people continue to pursue ways of making visible their wealth that they are so proud of and that represents their social standing, ways of making themselves stand out."

If this is the case, then we will always continue to be challenged by the close relationship between luxury and fashion. At the same time, however, luxury will always be something that satisfies our soul, regardless of the times or conditions. Luxury represents the (positive) desire that leads the way for fashion. I invite all of you to reconsider the meaning of 'luxury' at this exhibition.

Endnotes

1. Werner Sombart, *Liebe, Luxus und Kapitalismus*, trans. by Shigenari Kanamori (Tokyo: Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 2000) 131.

2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by Yoichi Maeda and Ko Yuki (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 2001) 209 (Pensée 316).

3. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institution*, trans. by Keishi Ohara (Tokyo: Iwanami

Bunko, 1961) 161.

4. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in 15th century Italy*, trans. by Fumio Shinozuka (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1989) p. 36.

5. Ihara Saikaku, "The Man Who Spent His Life in Love Part 6, Poetry Haori," *Collected Works of Saikaku – Part 1*, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 47, revised by Isoji Aso, Gen Itasaka, and Seiji Tsutsumi (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1957) 170. Ihara Saikaku, a 17th Century author, wrote in the *Ukiyo Zoshi* (floating world of prose) genre. Representative works include *The Man Who Spent His Life in Love* and *Life of an Amorous Woman*. In the latter, the sensibility of wearing clothing representing the ultimate in luxury was conveyed by a dappled, shibori-dyed (tie-dyed) kimono that typified extravagance. However, the edge of the *shibori* was deliberately burnt in order to reveal the red cotton filling in kimono.

6. In April 1981, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto showed, for the first time, a collection at the Paris Prêt-à-Porter collections. Their October 1982 (Spring and Summer 1983) collection featured dark, loose and frayed garments that were the polar opposite of the existing aesthetic. What was described as "the frayed look" and "avant-garde Japanese fashion" caused a sensation in the West.

7. Refer to my book *Fasshon no seiki (The Century of Fashion)*, (Tokyo: Heibonsha 2005).

8. From a statement made by Kawamata at the Japonisme Academic Symposium "What is Japan today? Three Individuals Who Ride the Waves of the Modern Age Give their Answers." (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum), 24 January 2009.

9. "Comme des Garçons for Comme des Garçons" exhibition (Tokyo: Comme des Garçons Head Office) 2006. The fourth in a series of private exhibitions held as part of staff education. Kawakubo's exhibition featured replicas made with sheeting and patterns of 93 garments shown by Kawakubo Rei and Junya Watanabe in the past.

10. Veblen, 164.

11. Martin Margiela's *9/4/1615* exhibition (11 June to 17 August 1997) was first shown in 1997 at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, and was then shown in Japan in 1999 as part of the *Visions of the Body* exhibition by KCI and the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.

(Edited by Dr. Kit Pancoast Nagamura)

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