

Japonism in fashion in London, 1971-72: 1 Designer, 3 Photographers, 3 Magazines

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Magazine representations of Kansai Yamamoto designs and the designer-as-archetype captured by three photographers, Japanese and European, in the London marketplace around the time frame of his fashion show in May, 1971 on the King's Road (*Kansai in Tokyo and London, Excerpts 1 and 2*, 1971) comprise a narrative on the presentation of Japanese ethnicity and modern day spectacle creative of a symbolic relationship between Japan and the British 'mediated by images' (Debord, 1994:4). The four magazine spreads from 1971 and 1972 portray a sense of spectacle (Debord, 1994) rooted in a definitive Japonism overlaid with a patina of Eastern exoticism for the benefit of a public eager to consume 'fantasy images of magazine photo shoots.' (Barley, 1999:97 in Evans, 2008)

The style of presentation of this Japan-inspired dress in British magazines, including both imagery and text, raises issues such as the impact in the Western marketplace of 'ethnic' dress, or the traditional clothing of native peoples considered part of the cultural patrimony as discussed by Baizerman, Eicher and Cerny (2008: 126-29), which is a hallmark of late 20th century fashion in the Western world (Crane, 2000); the phenomena of 'the Other' (Hall, 1997); and Orientalist constructions of non-Western cultural identity (Said, 1978).

The essential meaning of 'Japaneseness' (Iwabuchi, 1994) in dress in a modern context is captured in photographic imagery by both Japanese and non-Japanese photographers, namely, Clive Arrowsmith, Hideki Fujii, and Harry Peccinotti. Their photographs frame, stylize, romanticize, and stereotype Japanese cultural references in dress by depicting a variety of Japanese social roles for women, from the *geisha* to a product of technocracy, the woman-as-robot, and even roles for men by way of images of Kansai himself as a black-clad puppeteer of the *Bunraku* (traditional puppet theatre) or full body-tattooed *yakuza*, an organized crime outlaw. While such imagery is, at turns, provocative, evocative, erotic, subcultural, archetypal, and theatrical, the imagery in these layouts does not stand alone but must be examined in concert with the text to grasp the full import of the discourse on Japaneseness being initiated for the reader. As Jobling (1991) maintains, '...in deconstructing the meaning of any

fashion shoot, we need to decode both words and images *in tandem*.’

Photographs in these layouts are what Garner terms the ‘original point of interface between the photographers and their intended audience’ (2008:48). The photographs foster a symbiotic relationship with the live presentation of Kansai’s collection in London, which was in effect a variant of the *Kabuki* theatre for the benefit of the London marketplace, from store buyers and journalists to fashion followers interested in the infusion of Japanese orientation in dress at the end of the Swinging 1960s when exoticism, romanticism and nostalgia were in vogue (V & A online, 2012).

Individual layouts within a magazine’s *gestalt* yield valuable, substantive discursive material and include an amalgamation of ideas, visual imagery pointing to constructions of knowledge forming a matrix out of which discourses arise (Hall, 1997). The three photographers of Kansai photo layouts from 1971-72 in London magazines actually might fit an expanded definition of what McLuhan termed ‘the medium’ in his now-famous maxim, ‘The medium is the message’ (1994:9). Just as a light bulb has an effect on its surroundings by illuminating the darkness (McLuhan, 1994), Arrowsmith, Fujii, and Peccinotti shone lights on the discourse in British fashion media on Japonism in fashion in the early 1970s in London by serving as primary mediums with particularized conceptual standpoints.

Hideki Fujii for *Harpers and Queen*: mid-March of 1971

The Mitsukoshi Studios in Tokyo from the early twentieth century, for example, recorded European and American travellers’ sojourns in Japan by producing postcard portraits of them in Japanese kimono. The clothes here partake of the nature of ‘props’, the kind of studio costume which has a pedigree in a Western regime of visuality right back to the ‘Oriental’ turbans and robes to be found in the seventeenth-century Amsterdam studio of Rembrandt. (Wilson, 2010:430)

Photographer Hideki Fujii shot the images of the Kansai clothing worn in *geisha*-esque mode by Western models, as well as Kansai himself in *yakuza* mode in the magazine spread for the mid-March, 1971 issue of *Harpers and Queen* magazine. Renowned as a photographer of Japanese actresses and women in *kimono*, Fujii often included Japanese cultural artifacts as props in his photographic images, such as the tea cup, umbrella, bamboo, the lacquered box (“*urushi*”), photographed in Japanese settings

such as *tatami* mat rooms (Ono, 2005.) In the Kansai photo shoot for *Harpers and Queen*, the apparel takes on the flavor, if not role, of opera stage costuming, aided by the props, as the title of the layout references the 1903 opera *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini.

Fujii's interest in photographing nudes, as seen in his later book *Karada Kesho (Body Makeup)*, in which feminine bodies are painted in tattoo-like manner, harkens back to the Japanese celebration of feminine eroticism in *shunga*, erotic woodblock prints. The *Harpers & Queen* layout, not coincidentally, features a Kansai design sporting an 'erotic appliqué in the style of Shunga,--the Japanese art of pornography' (mid-March:70-71) worn by a non-Japanese model replete with hairstyle and hair ornaments of an *oiran*, or high-ranking courtesan, the perfect embodiment of the erotic motifs in the apparel. The provocative text seeks to reinforce the photographer's artistic focus on Japonism and titillate the reader by equating Japanese erotic art with contemporary 'pornography' in association with the image of a model-as-courtesan.

This sexual slant on the Kansai apparel is further emphasized by a portrait of the nearly nude, tattooed body of the designer, depicting the *yakuza* as an archetypal, Japanese masculine character. The pose expresses a firm virility, strength and endurance, overlaid with a patina of nationalism characteristic of the *yakuza* (Kaplan and Dubro, 2012). Fist raised and aimed at the viewer, tattooed body clad only in *fundoshi*, or loincloth, along with short-cropped hair and defiant, stoic facial expression, Kansai wears the *fundoshi* (loincloth) once worn for ritual suicide, or *hara-kiri*, which links the designer with the operatic tragedy of Madame Butterfly's suicide, a ritualistic act with spectacular overtones, and with nationalistic writer Yukio Mishima. Spectacle can be described as a form of narcissism, or self-preoccupied exercise, (Debord, 1994), as can the fashion show (Evans, 2008). Such a portrait of the designer, conjuring photographer Tamotsu Yato's images in 1967 of Mishima, who committed public ritualistic suicide (*hara-kiri*) clad in loincloth and brandishing a *katana* (sword), seem controversial due to the spectacular aspect alone. But this type of portrait by Fujii and Yato echoes images of tattooed Japanese men by photographer Felice Beato dating from 1870, which perpetuated the otherworldliness of Japan and 'endorsed and sustained the kind of mystique his European and American clientele wanted' (Guth, 2004:65). Beato's portraits, and in like turn, Fujii's and Yato's, serve to further reinforce the stereotype of an alien who is also an outsider in his own culture.

Fujii's body of work until his death in 2010 was an ode to Japanese culture and

femininity. The hippie-ish circular skirt and top worn by a Western model on the left page of the layout symbolically depicts the leap of her metamorphosis into a *geisha* as shown on the second page of the layout. It is a *fait accompli* in images orchestrated by a Japanese photographer enamored of his own culture. Photography by Fujii, hair-and-makeup by Sachiko Shibayama, who also worked on the Arrowsmith shoots of Kansai designs in 1971 issues of *UK Vogue*, accessories by Hiko Mizuno, the magazine text and Kansai fashion create a reverse mirror of historical images of Japanese women mimicking the fashion of Western women as seen in Japanese woodblock prints of the 1800s, (Figure 2).

Clive Arrowsmith for *UK Vogue*: July and October of 1971

There are two shoots by Arrowsmith for *UK Vogue* in 1971. Arrowsmith's oeuvre is the capturing of imagery calculated to promote and induce adoration of pop culture gods and goddesses. Still active in London today, he underscores through photography the high excess, colour, pageantry and pomp of pop culture and its icons, from the Dalai Lama to David Bowie, and the Kansai shoots for *UK Vogue* in 1971 are no exception.

Arrowsmith's orientation is in evidence with Kansai himself showcased in the July issue, along with his obviously theatrical fashion propositions, and appropriately photographed in the role of a traditional Japanese puppeteer of the *Bunraku* theatre, with the title announcing 'and now for the amazing...MR. KANSAI YAMAMOTO.' (July: 102-3), (Figure 3). The intimation in text and image is that he stands behind the models-as-puppets in his outfits and controls their movements. It is a romanticisation of the role of the Japanese designer as puppet master, tinged with slightly patriarchal overtones, but continues the theme of emphasizing exoticism as few *UK Vogue* readers in the early 1970s would obviously know much about *Bunraku*. The October 1 issue does not feature Kansai but the title of the shoot, 'Glamamoto,' along with the decidedly flamboyant fashions with jockey numbers appliquéd on jodhpur flaps of a 'kimono of padded satin circus stripes' with tattoo print (October 1, 1971: 119) and headdress leaving only the eyes of the model visible in burqa-esque style and described in text as 'pure theatre' and 'Kabuki theatre,' evoke the image of the designer-as-glam rock star, a rock music movement on the cusp of emergence at the time. The layout underscores Kansai's status as the self-described originator of 'Rock Fashion' (Yamamoto, 1974).

The July *UK Vogue* photo shoot of 1971 presents a variety of outfits by Kansai, and the issue of taste (Simmel, 1957) arises due to the difficulty of assessing the clothing's position in the marketplace as either haute couture or 'ready to wear.' Haute couture as well as the less exclusive prêt-à-porter was established as 'ready to wear couture' in the 1960s. (Loschek, 2009) As there were no familiar cultural references for the Kansai clothes, however, in addition to the question of degree of craftsmanship, the assessment of marketplace position presents as a dilemma.

In the mind of the early 20th century British public, famed tattoo artist George Burchett's tattoos of a Japanese geisha in traditional dress was considered 'high culture' while, in contrast, a Variety girl in stage costume deemed 'low culture' (O'Neill, 2007). Is the Kansai wear analogous to an early 20th century example of 'Japonism-as-high culture' due to its exoticism, thus making it possible to sidestep classification by a Western audience, or 'low culture' due to the possibility of its characterization as more stage costuming than haute couture or even *prêt-à-porter*? One can draw the conclusion that the Eurocentric world view may end up ranking the non-Western culture and its dress modes as 'more than' rather than 'less than' by idealizing The Other (Hall, 1997).

As outfits appear in the 'Kansai in London & Tokyo' show clips which are the same or similar to those in the *Vogue* shoots of 1971 by Arrowsmith, one can wonder whether the photographer was driven to frame the Kansai fashion propositions for the magazine layouts as a translation of fashion show spectacle, a practice in line with his imagery idealizing pop icons. However, fashion show and magazine layout are not one and the same, and magazine representations can initiate the starting point for the conversation on race, ethnicity, culture and gender by acting as a kind of more permanent reference work. '...clothing itself seems to become an alibi for the representation of other contemporaneous issues and ideas (Jobling,1999:2).' Kansai clothing in the *UK Vogue* layouts by Arrowsmith is in fact an alibi for opening the conversation on the issue of ethnicity, or in particular, 'Japaneseness' (Iwabuchi, 1994) and exoticism as an alibi for dealing with the incorporation of other cultural constructions of personal appearance into fashion marketed and sold in the Western marketplace, indicative of the postmodern world's predilection for obliterating strict categorizations such as the 'centered subject or psyche'(Jameson, 1991).

Harry Peccinotti for *NOVA*

The 1972 *NOVA* spread in the April issue, devoted entirely to the subject of Japan, showcases Kansai and Issey Miyake fashions (Figure 4) and was shot by Harry Peccinotti, a photographer credited with almost singlehandedly creating this the cutting edge fashion and lifestyle magazine in London in the 1970s before the publication folded in 1975. When each page is sequentially placed end to end in a vertical fashion, as the last page of the layout suggests should be done, 'a beautiful seven-foot frieze' is created with models in different Kansai and Miyake fashions appearing as if in motion in the manner of British photographer Edward Muybridge's photographic motion studies of the 1880s. The drama is evident in the Peccinotti photographs as is reference to the 1912 Marcel Duchamp painting 'Nude Descending a Staircase.' Because Harry Peccinotti has built his career, not unlike Fujii, on photographing erotic feminine imagery such as the Pirelli Calendar pinup girls, the effect can but be calculated.

This Duchampian documentation of Kansai and Miyake clothing has all the hallmarks of instability. The fashion photograph is, in fact, the 'unstable image' due not only to content but to the entire spectrum of influences on its production and consumption, such as

...constantly shifting matrix of relationships between production techniques, editorial decisions, mass circulation and readership, commercial interests, creativity, national and international proclivities, style and the feminine body. (Maynard, 2008:66)

An underlying instability of the fashion images in this shoot is actually depicted by creating the facsimile of a cascade of constantly shifting movement from page to page. Movement, shifts, and instability become the focus of the out-of-focus shots by Peccinotti to depict the transformation of images of femininity in Kansai and Miyake clothing.

The Peccinotti shoot of the Kansai and Miyake wear simultaneously seems to convey in photographic images the paradoxical and shifting London marketplace image of Japan as a nation as analyzed in the issue's articles. From the two Kansai outfits, which the text describes as, 'funny, colourful, pop,' to the Issey outfits with an indigenous dress sensibility (1972: 58-77), the progressive readership of *NOVA* is offered contradictory views of what constitutes Japaneseness not only by way of image but text. Additionally,

the theme of contradiction in the designer's own psyche, or intrapsychically, evidences as the layout's Kansai design-based narrative contrasts a Japanese hippie-ish hipster in green corduroy who transforms into a silvery techno-robot woman, reinforcing the stereotype of a productive nation known for the label 'Made in Japan' while simultaneously throwing into question that same stereotype by way of juxtaposed and inapposite imagery.

With this series of images of a Japanese woman in sartorial transition, Peccinotti captures for *NOVA* readership in the early 1970s not only the diametrically opposed Kansai propositions, consciously or unconsciously representative of the designer's own inner dialogue on the issue of what constitutes Japaneseness, but also the shifting definition of Japanese cultural identity from a Japanese standpoint due to the very different fashion offerings of Kansai and Miyake.

Conclusion

Three photographers took photographs of Kansai Yamamoto clothing in the 1971-72 period in London for three magazines and for the purpose of making available to the fashion-oriented public an image of Otherness, a selling point during the age of exoticism in bohemian London in the 1960s and early 1970s. The images were not for the purpose of celebrating the exciting discovery of foreign cultural artifacts as had been seen in the early 20th century when the Egyptology craze took hold in the West upon the discovery of King Tut's sarcophagus. The image of Otherness rooted in the exotic nature of Japan as revealed in Kansai clothing presented in UK magazines in the early 1970s was in effect a celebration of the discovery of possible alternative images of Western individual self-identity, and no less important, the refinement for Western readership of shifting views of Japan as a nation. The honing of the definition of Japanese ethnicity for the Japanese themselves, as can be conjectured from these layouts, may have been merely serendipitous but was no less valid a byproduct.

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