

# Through Western Eyes: Japanese Fashion in the 1980s

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In the early 1980s, Japanese fashion exploded onto the international scene. The work of designers such as Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo of *Comme des Garçons* was predicated on a revolutionary aesthetic vision—loose, architectural shapes, asymmetry, unusual textures and somber colors, “lace” made of holes and rips in fabric. To a Western public, these garments embodied unfamiliar notions of what counts as clothing and how clothing relates to human bodies. The fashion world reacted passionately. Detractors labeled it the “Hiroshima bag-lady look,” while enthusiasts welcomed it as pathbreaking and subversive. Many dismissed it as destined only for shock value, a passing fad. Yet Japanese fashion and its influence have been pervasive at all levels of the industry. And the aesthetic challenge posed by the Japanese avant-garde remains to this day, in the words of New York downtown designer Diane Permet, “fashion’s last big shock.”<sup>i</sup> The continuing success of designers such as Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto, among others, forced Paris and New York to take notice, if sometimes grudgingly, and to recognize Tokyo and Asia more generally as sites of creation in the fashion industry, not merely as producers of designs conceived in the West.

This essay examines the Western reception of “the Japanese” designers—Kawakubo, Miyake, Yamamoto—as complex, multiple, and multilayered, mediated by a particular geopolitical and political-economic history. The fashion industry is, after all, a business, and the debut of “the Japanese” designers in Paris occurred at a moment when Japanese and Western economic power, cultural authority, and place in a world order bristled with significance. At issue, especially from the late 1970s through the mid-1990s were the legacies of power-laden histories of Japanese/ Western relations. An overly schematic history of Japan’s relations with the West until the early 1990s would mark a legacy of inferiority symbolized in the “opening” of Japan to Commodore Perry, the

sense of “catching up” to Western modernity in the Meiji Restoration, the defeat in World War II, followed by a postwar period that witnessed an economic boom and an increasing sense of Japanese political and economic confidence as equal or, as some might say, even superior to the West.

The late 1970s through the mid-1990s was a particularly fraught era in Japanese/ U.S. relations. The formerly “inferior” Japan was becoming economically ascendant; the shoddy goods designated “made in Japan” of the immediate postwar period were supplanted by sophisticated products—electronics, automobiles—known precisely for their *quality*. Western media trumpeted the dangers of the Japanese economic threat, deploying tropes of “domination,” “invasion,” and “unfair” (i.e., “sneaky”) trade practices. *The New York Times* stated: “Americans as a whole, their leaders included, tend to see Japan as a strong, dynamic global economic power whose tentacles are spreading ever more widely...The Japanese, they feel, have gone beyond reasonable limits, are crowding our markets, are protecting themselves through hidden barriers and restrictions...”<sup>ii</sup> Academic analysts such as Ezra Vogel, in *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (1979) and, much later, William Ouchi in *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge* (1993), proposed ways that the U.S. could learn from the Japanese economic miracle. Popular opinion at the time subscribed to the notion of Japanese threat: “Ask the average American the reason for the trade deficit...and you are likely to get a one-word answer: Japan.”<sup>iii</sup> At issue here are inter-imperial rivalries among advanced capitalist nation-states.

Yet because the Japanese are racially marked, the rivalry is laced with familiar Orientalist discourses whose tropes circulate in the fashion world as they do in the realm of politics. Even when Japanese designers see themselves as part of a larger, transnational narrative field, the sedimented histories of nation-states and various essentializing practices can resituate them in terms of national and racial identities. For example, international fashion commentary tended to group Japanese designers on the basis of nationality rather than on individual design achievement, in contrast to the treatment of European and American designers. “The Japanese” were termed “avant-garde” or “experimental,” and the distinctive features of their work tended to be traced to origins in Japanese culture, such as a Zen minimalist aesthetic or regional costume

(e.g., the kimono as an example of wrapping rather than cutting and sewing), or to some overarching postmodernity.

Generally, journalists and fashion analysts at the time singled out several distinctive features of “Japanese fashion” in the early 1980s, and with some ambivalence about reproducing the essentializing effects of these discourses, I cite that commentary here.

First is the premium placed on the cloth as a point of departure. The fabrics themselves are often in-house designs, specially commissioned, artisanally produced textiles, or startling synthetics that draw on the best of available technology. Yohji Yamamoto speaks of nuno no hyôjô. Miyake draws on artisanal production from Japan and other sites; his collaborations with textile designer Makiko Minagawa are well-known. Rei Kawakubo works closely with textile designers and producers; their motifs can be featured motifs in her collections. For example, in the 1990s spring-summer collection I viewed in Paris, “non-woven, man-made” fabric was one such theme.

Harold Koda, head of the Costume Institute at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, called a second distinctive feature “terse expression;” that is, a respect for the integrity of the material and an aversion to cutting into the cloth. In an interview with me, he linked this aesthetic to the use of cloth in kimono, where virtually the whole bolt is used in its entirety, with relatively little cutting and little waste. “The minimum is used to maximum effect.”<sup>iv</sup> This stands in marked contrast to Western techniques, in which pattern pieces are laid out on fabric and then cut, resulting in a considerable amount of waste. On the body, the two garments may appear to be similar, but at the level of construction, the differences are stunning.

A related innovation prevalent in the “Japanese” clothing of the early 1980s was the creation of garments in one size, said to draw on the idea of the kimono that is adjusted to fit the body of the wearer through wrapping and tying. Barbara Weiser, who owned, with her mother and brother, the pioneering, highly successful New York boutique Charivari, described for me her first encounter with Yamamoto’s work:

It was...maybe 1979...what happened was that I was in Paris for the collections...rather disappointed and bored with what we saw that season, and I decided to go hunting. I went to Les Halles...into a shop on the rue du Cygne, and there were these garments that had the oddest look. They looked slightly like

hospital gowns in fabrics and forms that I had never seen, and they were all one size, which was in itself radical, and they were moderately priced at that point. I took about fifteen or twenty pieces into the fitting rooms and tried them all on and found that they were fascinating when I put them on the body. Actually, you couldn't tell how interesting the forms were when they were just hanging on the racks. I remember calling my mother at the hotel and said that she had to come immediately and see them, because they were the most interesting garments I had seen. I didn't know if I loved them or what; I just am utterly stunned. My mother and I, who are not the same size, she started trying on the exact same pieces, which was also odd in itself. And she immediately asked them if they had a collection, and it turned out that they had just opened the store...They wheeled out the racks, and we were buying the collection.<sup>v</sup>

Weiser was literally invested in Yamamoto's clothing as the retailer who introduced his line to the U.S., and she portrayed them in the most laudatory terms. Still, her encounter remains eloquent testimony to the shock Japanese garments provoked when they first appeared in Paris and New York.

Finally, Japanese designers are credited with the predominance of the color black during the early 1980s. In the U.S., Kawakubo and Yamamoto's exploration of black defined the 1980s all-black, hip, downtown/ art world look in New York. Jeff Weinstein of the *Village Voice* argued that for Kawakubo "'black' becomes a full spectrum, an examination of the relationship between fiber and dye."<sup>vi</sup>

Fashion commentators were often celebratory, reversing stereotyped accusations of Japanese as talented mimics. Well-known Boston boutique owner Alan Bilzerian commented "Every single fashion designer has copied their skirts, shapes, wraps." Jean Drusedow, then Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, noted in an interview with me the "enormous" impact of Japanese fashion in the 1980s, seen industry-wide in the looser cuts of clothing in fashion at all prices. Barbara Weiser extended this point:

The odd thing is that...outside urban places they don't know the influence the Japanese designers have had on the clothing that they all wear...there are certain

kinds of cuts and certain fits that have now become—whether it's oversized clothing or...elastic-waist pants or square tops—these forms have been swept up by American manufacturers and trickle down to everything, including, let's say, sweat clothes. But the people don't know that's where it comes from.<sup>vii</sup>

At the same time, discourses of competition and racialization extant at that historical moment were equally visible in the fashion industry. Grouping designers according to nationality can easily be turned toward Eurocentric and Orientalist ends. Critic Homi Bhabha argued that for the colonizer, what he calls “mimicry,” the reproduction of dominant ways of being by the colonized, can produce a sense of anxiety in the colonizer. The colonized can mimic perfectly, yet remain “not quite/ not white.”<sup>viii</sup> In this case, one could argue that Japanese designers represented “imitators” of Western fashion because they were playing on a field established elsewhere. And precisely because of their skill and innovation, they could constitute a racial threat. Racial overtones emerged blatantly in the Associated Press coverage of the Paris collections in the early 1980s: “Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons proved as usual to be the high priestess of the Jap wrap.” *Women's Wear Daily* and other unsympathetic gatekeepers dubbed the black, asymmetrical garments “the Hiroshima bag-lady look.” Condescension and dismissal were sometimes shown in subtle ways. Writer/ publisher James Nelson pointed out to me the frequent misspellings of the names of Japanese designers in early articles in *Vogue* and in British fashion magazines. He passionately contended that such mistakes would be neither committed nor tolerated with European or American designers.<sup>ix</sup>

Reception among retailers seemed equally mixed. Jeff Weinstein of the *Village Voice* described to me the “shabby little Japanese design corners” in major department stores during the heyday of Bloomingdale's in Manhattan. “It's not treated well; you walk in, and you look at their Ralph Lauren boutique—it's all very prim and proper. This they don't give a damn about.”<sup>x</sup> The marginalization of the work of Japanese designers he attributed to racism and to a climate of Japan-bashing. Similarly, Barbara Weiser noted the anti-Japanese reaction in the fashion world, linking it to wider issues of trade and economic competition during a period when Japan-bashing was in the air.

Just as the daring of Japanese clothing provoked virulent negative response, so did it win acclaim. In the winter of 1988, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs mounted an exhibition of Miyake's work in the winter of 1988, and Costume Curator at the Musée, Yvonne Deslandres, called him "the greatest creator of clothing of our time." The innovative designers Claude Montana and Romeo Gigli, who were emblematic of 1980s aesthetics, both acknowledged Miyake as a major influence. The corps of French fashion journalists presented Miyake with an "Oscar" of fashion as the best international designer at their first awards ceremony in October 1985. Indeed, his work earned him what seems to be the greatest accolade the fashion world can bestow: "*son style dépasse les modes*," his style goes beyond fashion. <sup>xi</sup>

But praise can take the form of a backhanded compliment and can construct limits, creating a colonizing distance, even as it celebrates "the Japanese." For example, an editor with a major French fashion magazine told me that many fashion professionals in France are fascinated with Japan, for they consider Japan to be the only country truly able to appreciate and understand French fashion on an aesthetic level. What initially appears to be a lavish compliment seems less flattering on closer examination. In fact, the utterance reasserts the centrality of French fashion as standard which only Japan can appreciate or approach. Surely the elevation of Japan to the position of France's appreciative audience scarcely constructs the relationship as an equal one. In both cases, Japan is "not quite/ not white," almost but not quite France's equal.

Perhaps most notable in the Western reception of Japanese design in the 1980s was the echo of the rhetoric of war that recurred more generally during that period, when anxiety about the threat of Japanese economic competition sometimes assumed the guise of martial metaphors. For example, in *Vogue's* retrospective of the major fashion influences of the 1980s, Japanese designers were grouped in a series of photos labeled "the Japanese invasion." They were the only designers categorized on the basis of nationality, even as their work was acknowledged to be classic. Similarly, a French article on Japanese fashion trumpeted its headline "*L'offensif japonais*," demonstrating the language of war and race circulated in Europe as well. Metaphors in the fashion industry echoed those deployed more generally in what was then termed "the trade war," and they remind us of the inextricability of fashion from capitalist accumulation and interimperial rivalry. Given that Orientalisms still circulate in the world at

large, they have not disappeared in the fashion industry, but their frequency and virulence vis-à-vis “the Japanese” are relatively muted in comparison to the early 1980s. Indeed, this account of the Western reception of “the Japanese” designers may now seem quaint, given that designers such as Kawakubo, Miyake, and Yamamoto are well-established in Western capitals of fashion and in light of the international respect accorded their work. Predictably, allusions to the threat of Japanese “invasion” has subsided with the decline of the Japanese economy. Yet since fashion is but one industry within a larger world of transnational capitalism and is heir to particular, power-laden geopolitical relations among nation-states, Orientalist stereotypes will inevitably recur in one guise or another, given that the social, historical and political formations fostering Orientalism have not disappeared. When we analyze the fashion industry in a global frame, it is crucial to remember that these interactions and encounters occur within sedimented geopolitical and economic histories. The Western reception of Japanese fashion in the 1980s cannot be understood outside these sedimented histories, and it provides an exemplary case of the contradictory, ambivalent complexity of Japan’s relationship with “the West.”

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<sup>i</sup> Pernet, Diane. Designer. Personal interview. July 1989.

<sup>ii</sup> Watts, William. “On U.S.-Japanese Ties.” *The New York Times* 26 December 1980: A-31.

<sup>iii</sup> Eason, Henry. “The Pull of Protectionism.” *Nation’s Business* May 1984: 53.

<sup>iv</sup> Koda, Harold. Personal interview, 1989.

<sup>v</sup> Weiser, Barbara. Vice-President, Charivari, New York. Personal interview. 13 November 1989.

<sup>vi</sup> Weinstein, Jeff. Writer, *Village Voice*. Personal interview. November 10, 1989.

<sup>vii</sup> Weiser, Barbara. Vice-President, Charivari, New York. Personal interview. 13 November 1989.

<sup>viii</sup> Bhabha, Homi. “Of Mimicry and Man.” *October: An Anthology*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

<sup>ix</sup> Nelson, James. Editor, *Magazine House*, Tokyo; Freelance consultant. Personal interview. 12 August 1989.

<sup>x</sup> Weinstein, Jeff. Writer, *Village Voice*. Personal interview. 10 November 1989.

<sup>xi</sup> *Elle* 3 Feb 1986: 58.

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