

When the West Wore East: Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and The Rise of the Japanese Avant-Garde in Fashion

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In the early 1980s two progressive fashion designers from Japan, Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto, introduced their collections to the Parisian public for the first time making an indelible mark on the fashion world. Both had established their respective labels in their native Japan years prior - Kawakubo started her first business in 1975, while Yamamoto had started his in 1972 (Kawamura, 2004: 126) – but their “arrival” on the international scene would have a far-reaching impact on the whole of the fashion world. In fact, it marks an important turning point in Western design. According to curator and fashion historian Richard Martin, “we in the West have seen our world transformed by Japanese dress...It is impossible to describe and analyze late twentieth-century fashion in Europe and America without taking account of the substantive contribution of Japanese design” (Martin 1995: 215).

The garments shown by Kawakubo and Yamamoto in Paris represented a departure from the Western conventions of fashion design, challenging long held notions of gender and beauty. In fact, their designs often eschewed tailoring that accentuated the female form in favor of enshrouding layers of loose-fitting fabric, abstract shaping and asymmetric hemlines. Preferring a monochromatic style, these garments were often a solid black and were constructed from roughly textured fabrics giving the allusion of tearing or weathering. Initially appalled by Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s creations, many fashion journalists of the time assigned them derisive labels such as “ragged chic” or “bag lady look” (Morris, 1983:SM40). To westerners accustomed to gender-specific, body-conscious dress these radical garments seemed absurd. “[Yamamoto’s clothes] simply do not follow the shape of the body in any conventional manner” the *New York Times* reported. “Whereas most clothes accentuate a natural verticality, Mr. Yamamoto’s seem almost horizontal.” (Duka1982: C8).

While the western world had already been exposed to Japanese fashion during the 1960s and the 1970s, the early designers such as Hanae Mori, Kenzo Takada and Kansai Yamamoto, proved adept at blending eastern elements of design with those already established by

western fashion to produce an exotic but relatively tempered look. Characteristics such as layering, a loose voluminous fit, wide sleeves and the use of fine silks printed with nature motifs, were elements of traditional Japanese dress introduced to western fashion by these earlier designers.

Another of Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto's compatriots to precede them in Paris was Issey Miyake. Also considered a progressive designer by the fashion cognoscenti, Miyake was a forward thinker who was, as the *New York Times*' Bernadine Morris wrote, "constantly poking beyond the borders of established fashion." (Morris, "In Paris, Fashion..." 1981: C18). His work, which was rooted in traditional Japanese design philosophy, nonetheless explored the relationship between traditional Japanese apparel and Western fashion. "Issey Miyake has a trick of turning Japanese work clothes such as baggy pants and loose coats into useful, muted, casual dress for Westerners," wrote Morris (Morris, "Ungaro and..." 1981: B10). The presence of Issey Miyake, together with the subsequent emergence of Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, would give rise to the fashion phenomenon referred to as the Japanese avant-garde (Kawamura, 2004: 127).

In April of 1981, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto held their debut show in Paris's Intercontinental Hotel. Because they lacked an established social network there, the show was under attended and for the most part ignored by the fashion press. As a former Yamamoto executive attested, theirs "was not an overnight success as some people thought" (quoted in Kawamura, 2004:128). Though minimal, critical response was mixed, capturing the interest at least, of a few journalists and the following year, with the aid of a French publicist Kawakubo and Yamamoto were thrust into the international spotlight in earnest.

In 1982, Kawakubo and Yamamoto's creations began to elicit serious attention across the Pacific, as well. In the United States initial reception of their work was less than favorable, as most Americans viewed the oversized, deconstructed garments, with their tattered edges and misplaced pockets as an outright mockery of conventional clothing styles. In addition to projecting what was widely perceived as an impoverished look, an almost exclusive adherence to the use of the color black in their creations was misinterpreted as a reflection of dread and hopelessness, given its association with death in western cultures. In reality, Kawakubo and Yamamoto used black fabrics to produce a formless, *asexual* look, and not as a means of conjuring post-apocalyptic imagery with their creations, as some had quipped. More to the point, many American fashion journalists, as had their European counterparts,

viewed Kawakubo and Yamamoto's garments as not just anti-establishment but also anti-female (Mears, 2006:33). As one reporter declared "[Yamamoto's] designs are definitely for the 'woman who stands alone.' Who would want to be seen with her? Yamamoto's clothes would be most appropriate for someone perched on a broom" (Long, 1982: 7).

"My clothes are for women to wear today." Rei Kawakubo once explained, and while she and Yamamoto drew heavily upon traditional Japanese design aesthetics, they were decidedly unconcerned with the western concept of elegance in their creations. Kawakubo and Yamamoto's garments were instead intended for modern living and much of their success was attributed to their ability to strike the perfect balance between the traditions of their native culture and what the *New York Times* called the "aggressive tempo of modern times." (Dorsey, 1982: C7). This is the meaning behind Kawakubo's assertion that her designs were for the woman "who is independent ... who can stand by herself" (Morris, "From Japan...", 1982: C10). Ironically, in their ability to transcend long-held notions of "elegant fashion," Kawakubo and Yamamoto's design strategies cast a new definition of beauty, one based on strength and independence. Reviewing Yamamoto's 1982 Fall/Winter collection John Duka wrote: "Mr. Yamamoto has combined some of the oldest and newest fashion ideas into the dazzling personal vision of the contemporary woman. And what she looks like is a distillation of the street fashions that began to pour westward from London in 1976 mixed with a few shapes from ancient Japan" (1982: C8).

The driving force in Kawakubo's career in fashion was innovation, "to do things that [had] never been done before, things with a strong image" (Morris, "From Japan...", 1982:C10). Inevitably this artistic philosophy gained a measure of positive acknowledgement from the western public, as some were taken by the intricate construction and intellectual approach to design evident in her garments. What may have initially appeared to be a ragged look was upon closer inspection the result of a calculated design choice. As *New York Times* fashion reporter Bernadine Morris observed:

"Esthetic considerations are significant in the Japanese collections, taking the form of a hidden pocket in an unexpected place in the clothes of Yohji Yamamoto or cutouts that are employed for textural effects in Mrs. Kawakubo's clothes. These are a natural extension of the Japanese sense of artistry apparent in their flower arrangements, their prints, their presentation of food" (1983: SM40).

More and more, the western media began to take notice of the undeniable impact of revolutionary Japanese designs on fashion. “Not bound by the dictates of entrenched European fashion houses” *Newsweek* reported, “Japanese designers experiment with shape and fabric, often doing the unthinkable” (Smolowe et al. 1982: 98). In a logical progression, many began to regard modern Japanese designs as works of art, a growing sentiment initiated perhaps, by *Artforum International*, which featured Issey Miyake’s bamboo bustier on its cover in 1982. Acknowledging the creativity of her younger countrymen, veteran designer Hanae Mori explained that “[The Japanese] don’t have any long tradition of Western style clothes in Japan, so the younger designers are quite free” (Smolowe et al. 1982: 98).

Regardless, of any debate concerned with interpreting their respective designs, the understated, loose fitting garments of Kawakubo and Yamamoto began to define the “new way of dressing” (Dorsey, 1982:C7). For American women, the appeal of the “Japanese fashions” was found in the superior quality textiles used, workmanship, and the practicality of the relaxed fit, which permitted a new freedom of movement. While a strict allegiance to the brand was still reserved for a small group of intrepid woman with a strong interest in avant-garde fashion, many retailers found their customers assimilating Comme des Garçons pieces into their western wardrobes. As one *New York Times* reporter noted “Western wearers of these Japanese styles seldom initiate the designers’ runway suggestion of a complete outfit. Clearly, New York women prefer to integrate a piece or two with Western styles.” However he also acknowledged that, “Just as clearly, if this layering makes the wearer look somewhat heavier, there is the satisfaction of being on the cutting edge of fashion” (“Bold Japanese Fashions...”,1983:C8).

In a 1979 advertising campaign for Parco Retail group created by Eiko Ishioka, the iconic American film star, Faye Dunaway, was featured dressed as the Japanese Buddhist deity Kannon. Referring to the West’s nascent interest in eastern culture, the award-winning Ishioka wrote of the campaign, “Japan has learned from the West...but the situation is now changing. Today’s trend’s show that the West is starting to look East.” Foreshadowing the contributions to western fashion by the likes of Kawakubo and Yamamoto in the coming decade, she continued, “‘Can West wear East?’ is being asked by the New Japan, which looks forward to the future.” (Hiesinger and Fischer, 1994: 125). In a 1980 interview, Harvard professor, Ezra Vogel, author of the seminal comparative study, *Japan as Number*

One: Lessons for America, posed the more general question, “They try to learn from us, why shouldn’t we reverse the learning process?” (Stokes, 1980: A2).

Certainly, foreign interest in Japan was evident as early as the mid-19th century when first the country opened to the West. But while its influence on the formal and decorative arts was relevant enough to be anointed as an “ism” (Bennets, 1982: 1), to many historians the exposure of modern “Japanese fashion” to a suddenly more accepting international audience was intrinsically tied to the rise of Japan as an economic force in the 1980s. If the overseas success of Datsun, Toyota, Sony and Panasonic symbolized the technological might of Japan, the ubiquitous presence of Kawakubo and Yamamoto on the international fashion scene was an extension of their country’s inventive prowess. During this period, American interest and appreciation of Japanese culture achieved an unprecedented high, the media citing reasons for this peak that ranged from Japan’s industrial success - “Made in Japan” now carried a newfound prestige (Smolowe et al. 1982: 98) - to the cultural exoticism depicted in author James Clavell’s bestseller *Shogun*. While westerners’ sudden fascination with all things Japanese, from film to food to architecture, was on the rise, the growing influence of uniquely Japanese design in the fashion world was particularly dramatic.

“Usually one has to give the Japanese the first spark, but in fashion they have done it all themselves.” remarked Jenifer Fonaris, a boutique manager in Rome (Smolowe et al. 1982: 98), alluding to the definitive originality of modern Japanese designers. Praised by the American media as having established the new way of dressing, the fashion triumvirate of Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, and Issey Miyake helped transform Tokyo into a major center of international fashion. Kalman Rutenstein, fashion director at Bloomingdales, which in the 1970s had become the first American retailer to carry Japanese clothes, declared that, “Tokyo [was] becoming a major fashion source, just as in the 1960s it was the London street scene” (Weir, 1982: 246). The subsequent success of other contemporary designers such as Mitsuhiro Matsuda of Nicole, Hiroko Koshino, and Yukiko Hanai was due in large part to the *pioneering* work of Japanese avant-garde designers in the West.

In her book, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion* (2004), sociology professor Yunia Kawamura makes the observation that Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto’s decision to show their collections in Paris was made because by legitimizing their designs within the French system they would facilitate their entry into the international fashion scene. Not coincidentally, their move to Paris came at the precise time when international focus was

beginning to turn towards Japan. Jun Kanai, the United States representative for Issey Miyake, attributed the growing interest in the country's new designers to "the refreshing new creativity in Japan, where the designers are less bound by tradition, as the French are, or by commercialism as the Americans are...The Japanese are freer, and everybody's now looking to Japanese design for inspiration" (quoted in Bennetts, 1982). Their growing presence in the fashion world was not a play for Japanese dominance in fashion, however. In fact, rather than undermine the French fashion system, Kawakubo and Yamamoto offered an altogether different perspective on design philosophy that has since been assimilated into Western fashion. Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto stretched the boundaries established by Western designers, precipitating an aesthetic shift that has firmly established modern Japanese fashion's place in the whole of the fashion world.

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