



Bonnie English

# japanese fashion designers

The Work and Influence  
of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto  
and Rei Kawakubo

# **Japanese Fashion Designers**

## **QUEENSLAND COLLEGE OF ART, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA**

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**Dedicated to my beloved grandson, Lachlan**

**This book also pays tribute to the courageous Japanese people who have faced the March 11, 2011 tragedy with great strength, character and honour.**

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# Introduction

Since 1970, the work of the Japanese fashion designers has had an unequivocal impact on Western dress. Initiated by Issey Miyake, and followed ten years later by Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, they offered a new and unique expression of creativity, challenging the established notions of status, display and sexuality in contemporary fashion. Miyake celebrated forty years in the fashion business in 2010 and Kawakubo and Yamamoto followed suit in 2011 marking thirty years since their first show in Paris. In London, in the spring of 2011, the Victoria and Albert Museum unveiled a retrospective of Yamamoto's work, commemorating his contribution to the world of fashion. In the *Financial Times Weekend*, of 11 October 2009, journalist/photographer Mark O'Flaherty wrote:

The middle-ageing of the triumvirate of revolutionary Japanese design is as shocking as any of their more confrontational collections; to many of their modernist followers they still seem like box-fresh radical upstarts, while for the high street they have only recently come into existence through diffusion projects with the likes of H&M and Adidas. So, four decades on, have they really revolutionised the world of fashion?

*Japanese Fashion Designers: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo* is a book which will provide you with the knowledge that you will need to answer this question. It is not only a study of the aesthetics of fashion but it is a study of cultural aesthetics, and the differences, in this respect, between East and West. There are countless examples in the history of art which evidence how the West has been informed by the East but none quite as dramatic as in the history of contemporary fashion design. This book will provide an understanding of how Japanese thought, tradition and advanced textile technology became an intrinsic part of fashion design practice in the late twentieth century. It will show how the Japanese designers influenced a whole generation of young, emerging Belgian designers, amongst others, and how this inter-cultural and inter-generational influence has infiltrated the soul of the international fashion industry.

## LOOKING BACK—A CULTURAL HERITAGE

The legacy of an understated elegance has become an intrinsic characteristic of modern Japanese design, clearly evident in the work of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and

## 2 INTRODUCTION

Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons. But, in reality, it is historically underpinned by its samurai origins, an intrinsic part of Japanese culture. While this may seem surprising, to say the least, the historian Ikegami explains:

In terms of dress, when the role of the samurai changed by the late 17th century, and their military duties were replaced by bureaucratic duties, their lavish and luxurious custom-made kimonos, made from expensive fabric and worn especially for ceremonial purposes (which had been seen earlier as appropriate to their rank in society), were replaced by a more sober style of everyday clothing. Instead, the wearing of darker clothing, especially black which symbolised self-discipline, became accepted as more sophisticated urban attire and a sign that good taste was expressed by subtle stylistic differences and intelligence in design. (2005: 275)

Also, other subtle practices such as wearing cotton kimonos lined with silk or using silk in undergarments became common. In other words, certain luxuries were not abandoned but simply hidden to all except the wearer. The historical precedent of placing restrictions on excessively sumptuous dress (common across all cultures) ultimately encouraged restraint and refinement.<sup>1</sup> It is this adage that has been adopted by Japanese contemporary designers. Yet, still allowing the past to resonate in the present, Rei Kawakubo, in her typically masked way, asks 'What is in front and what is behind?'

For the Japanese, elegance and refinement do not concur with glamour, or with status or class. In this context, one can understand why Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo did not want to be associated with haute couture and would only show their designs in the prêt-à-porter collection showings. Throughout history, a love of restraint, a special type of subtle beauty, incomplete perfection, a cult of refinement based on simplicity and austerity have always been elements of Japanese aesthetics.

### **THE TEA CEREMONY**

The same sensibility is applied to everyday life as to art, so that even ceremonies directly bound up with everyday living are extremely highly developed. Hasegawa, in his *The Japanese Character: A Cultural Profile* (1988), argues that this approach is part of the Japanese character and can be applied to the art of packaging, garden design and food preparation, as well as dress. Westerners find it interesting that ritualization in the traditional Japanese tea ceremony is a social construction which underscores the nature of Japanese culture. Seen as a social sacrament, its rites were codified and conventionalized and the ceremony, still prominent today, is a means of consolidating the links with tradition and the past. Kakuzo Okakura, in *The Book of Tea* (1964), originally written in 1906, points out that in the late nineteenth century many of the old traditions were cast aside, as Japan embraced the Western world.

This ritual, which was meant to arouse feelings which were associated with a sense of beauty, was often relegated, almost as an apology, to the more conservative facets of Japanese society.

For Keene, in his *Appreciations of Japanese Culture* (1981), the symbolic reference inherent in the tea ceremony reflects the importance of simplicity and perishability in the Japanese aesthetic. He believes that 'it is possible to say of certain aesthetic ideals that they are characteristically and distinctly Japanese' (1981: 11). In terms of simplicity, Keene argues that 'the tea ceremony developed as an art concealing art, an extravagance masked in the garb of noble poverty' and that perishability 'came to be a necessary condition of beauty' (1981: 22, 30). When Yamamoto and Kawakubo first paraded their 'shrouds' on the catwalks of Paris they were greeted with howls of disapproval and their 'look' was dubbed the 'aesthetics of poverty'. The notion of beauty being found in objects which were aged with time and use, such as the old, irregular and worn drinking vessels often used for the tea ceremony, was difficult for Western audiences to appreciate. In Japan, however, it reflected individuality and appealed to the humanistic spirit. Perishability, it would seem, is closely allied with suggestion, another component of Japanese aesthetic ideals. That which is omitted, whether in literary writing or in the visual arts, creates an ambiguity that, in turn, becomes a 'suggestion of meaning' that is the source of its beauty. For instance, in Haiku poetry in particular, it is the absence of certain words that creates an ambiguity (Keene 1981: 14), and when negative space dominates positive space, it creates an ambiguous spatial element in Japanese watercolour painting. These characteristics of simplicity, irregularity, perishability and suggestion of meaning have been instilled in the history of Japanese writing and painting for thousands of years. In aesthetic terms, this sensitivity and subtleness are still considered important cultural components and remain a dominant force in contemporary Japanese art and design.

Interestingly, while the element of perishability was underscored in the early work of Yamamoto and Kawakubo in the form of deconstructive practices including ragged edges, tears, knots and uneven hemlines, it was addressed much more literally in the work of some of the Belgian designers, and in the work of Martin Margiela in particular. He experimented widely to show how garments decompose when exposed to the elements and how used clothing could be given a second life. In Japan, fashion designers are closely aligned to the textiles that inspire their work, collaborating closely with textile designers to create new fabrics which develop from technological processes that subtly imitate the essence of individualized handcrafted surfaces. The Japanese have a heightened respect for materials, whether natural or synthetic, partly based on Japan's indigenous Shinto religion, which centres on the worship of, and communion with, the spirits of nature. This book has dedicated a chapter to the distinguished textile designers who have helped to establish the textile culture in contemporary Japan.