



# INTRODUCTION

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**The cutting edge: fashion from Japan looks at key pioneers in Japanese fashion—Junichi Arai, Hanae Mori and Kenzo Takada—and the established names—Rei Kawakubo/Commes des Garçons, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto—but also at the new generation of designers who, while little known outside Tokyo and Paris [?] fashion and art circles, are creating extraordinary works and further challenging Western notions of fashion.**

## The new generation

Browsing through a flea market in New York while on holiday, Hiroaki Ohya (born 1970) [will appear in profiles] was impressed by a selection of rare books. It seemed to the young designer from Tokyo that unlike fashion with its transitory, cyclical nature, books had a permanency that enabled ideas to be transported over time. Back in Japan, these thoughts led him to create 'The Wizard of Jeanz', a remarkable series of 21 'books' that fold out into clothes. [1.3]

'The Wizard of Jeanz' is a technical tour de force, a feat of craftsmanship that allows a book to transform into a ruffled neckpiece, a pair of jeans or an elegant evening dress [1.2]. In a similar experimental mood, Shinichiro Arakawa (born 1965) created a series of garments that are framed like paintings but once out of the frame, put on and zipped up around the body become real, wearable clothes [1.1]. Transformable themes are also seen in Aya Tsukioka's (born 1978) wrap skirt with its apron front screen-printed on the reverse with the image of a Coca-Cola vending machine similar to the millions found on Tokyo's streets. When the wearer unties the waistband and lifts the apron above her head, she can 'hide' behind this image. [1.11]

Kosuke Tsumura (born 1959) questions the role of fashion in today's society with his signature piece for his 'Final Home' label: a transparent nylon coat with up to 40 multifunction zip pockets conceived as a final home in the case of disaster, either natural or man made [1.6]. Tsumura was motivated to rethink his attitude to fashion by the growing number of homeless living in Tokyo. Expressions of political consciousness and concern for the wider world are also seen in Masahiro Nakagawa's (born 1967) response to Tokyo's overwhelming consumer culture: a recycling project, in which he invites participants to bring him old or unused clothes which he and co-workers from the label '20471120' alter and restructure into a new, fashionable garment. [1.8]

Japanese designers participate in the twice-yearly Paris collections and their designs are acclaimed for their avant-garde quality and use of technically advanced textiles and craftsmanship. Yoshiki Hishinuma (born 1958) creates three-dimensional evening dresses combining traditional shibori techniques with the technology of thermoplastics.1 Junya Watanabe's (born 1961) collections in the late 1990s were described as 'techno fashion' for their use of high-tech fabrics such as laminated synthetics in dayglo colours inspired by the cellophane gels used for theatre lighting. [1.4]

With the exception of Junya Watanabe, the mid career designers represented in The cutting edge are little known in the West. Japan's reputation in international fashion is largely based on the work of Issey Miyake (born 1938), Rei Kawakubo (born 1942) and Yohji Yamamoto (born 1943) who since the 1980s have



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maintained their creative dominance by consistently creating fashion that has pointed the way forward.

The story of Japanese fashion's impact on the West is brief, given that it has only come about in the postwar years. Paris in the early 1980s was already familiar with Japanese designers through the work of Hanae Mori (born 1926), the first Japanese designer to show abroad, in New York in 1965, the designer known as Kenzo, and Issey Miyake. But it was the impact of Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto's collaborative catwalk shows in the early 1980s that really created an intense awareness of Japanese fashion. Kawakubo and Yamamoto's garments were characterised by intentional flaws, a monochrome palette, exaggerated proportions, drapery, asymmetry and gender-neutral styling.

The clothes and models looked shabby, in stark contrast to the power suits and fantasy evening dresses, paraded on beautifully presented bodies, in vogue at the time. Although the clothes by these two designers were just as new looking for the Japanese, it has been argued that the aesthetics of traditional Japanese culture (as Akiko Fukai explains in her essay), particularly of wabi sabi (beauty that is imperfect, impermanent or incomplete) and of the kimono (referring to the space between body and outer covering), were inherent within their work.<sup>2</sup> Initially the response to these Japanese designs was hostile and derisory but within a few years the new aesthetic came to have a major influence on mainstream fashion. 'Japanese fashion in the eighties provided a new way of looking at fabric, texture, cut and image. It questioned the artifice of tailoring and couture, literally deconstructing garments,' recalled art critic Deyan Sudjic. 'Japan in the eighties was a shot in the arm of fashion, a revelation that it could be more than sex, show business and commerce.'<sup>3</sup>

This was not the first time that Japanese design had created an impact on Western fashion.<sup>4</sup> Japonisme, which can be defined as the Western assimilation of basic Japanese aesthetics, first took hold in Paris in the 1850s and 1860s as a craze among the avant-garde painters of the day, and filtered into England through the agency of people such as James McNeill Whistler who had worked in Paris before moving to England. After Japan was opened to the West in the mid 19th century, the European market was flooded with a rich array of decorative goods. The vogue for Japanese wares was influenced by merchants like Arthur Liberty but also the avant-garde such as EW Godwin and Christopher Dresser. Japonisme in architecture, painting and the decorative arts has been well documented, but it wasn't until [XXXX] that the Kyoto Costume Institute presented a series of exhibitions which demonstrated the influence of Japonisme and the assimilation of basic Japanese aesthetics on Western fashion. A closer look at clothing of the second half of the 1800s reveals Japanese motifs or fabric exported from Japan used in Western fashions. In the early 1900s the influence was seen not just in the ornamentation but also in the cut of outer garments such as opera coats, created by leading Parisian couturiers, that were reminiscent of kimonos.

### The big 3

In their different ways, Miyake, Kawakubo and Yamamoto have all created garments that can be appreciated as part of a cultural climate that includes art, architecture and design (as described in Bonnie English's essay). Ideas and

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themes removed from trends, and fashion in the street sense, have continued to evolve for Miyake, Kawakubo and Yamamoto.

From his time as a graphic design student at Tama Art University in Tokyo during the early 1960s, Issey Miyake has experimented with clothing production. His student show of 1963, titled 'A poem of cloth and stone', aimed at:

... suggesting clothing as visual creation rather than being utilitarian. We want to stimulate the imagination through clothing. It is not a fashion show, though the works do breathe in contemporary style. Accordingly, I think the next step will be clothing that looks to the future.<sup>5</sup>

After a period spent in Paris, London and New York working for different couturiers, Miyake returned to Tokyo and set up the Miyake Design Studio in 1970 with textile designer Mikiko Minagawa. Along with his interest in utilising aspects of Japanese folk culture and traditional textiles, Miyake's preoccupation during the 1970s was the development of a garment that was reduced to its simplest elements. Drawing on the tradition of the kimono he produced garments he called 'a piece of cloth', which were, essentially, square or rectangular in



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# REI KAWAKUBO

b 1942, place

## New dressing

Since her Paris debut in 1981, Rei Kawakubo has been recognised as a leading avant-garde designer of international fashion and her clothes have been celebrated for their ability to challenge traditional notions of feminine allure in women's dress. Her Comme des Garçons ['bump'??] collection, presented in Spring/Summer 1997, perplexed even her most loyal followers, featuring as it did tight tops and skirts in bright stretch gingham that were swollen with plump, goosedown-filled lumps and coils.

Padding has a precedent in historical Western dress---for example, the hip pads worn to create the fashionable silhouette of the 1700s or the paddings used to stuff the leg-of-mutton sleeves of an 1830s dress. Kawakubo's vision was not to enhance the contours of the body but to place the padding in unlikely positions so that buttocks, torso and shoulders appeared distended, shifted and extended. While many found the clothes unnerving and unflattering, others found the collection visionary. The choreographer Merce Cunningham used Kawakubo's designs for a dance piece titled Scenario. To Cunningham the designs recalled 'a man in a raincoat and a backpack [and] a woman in shorts with a baby on her side ... shapes we see every day'.

From the beginning of her career, Kawakubo has aimed to express something new with each collection. In an interview for a Japanese fashion magazine she explained her motivation for the Spring/Summer 1997 collection:

I was trying out three approaches with that collection. I wanted to find something from a different angle to anything I had done up until then. I wanted to design the body itself, and I wanted to use stretch fabrics. At that time, I felt there was nothing that gave me conviction. I was keenly aware of the difficulty of expressing something using garments alone. And that is how I arrived at the concept of designing the body.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Sarah Mower, 'Talking with Rei', Vogue Nippon, September 2001, pp 156--9

### Gingham 'bump' Dress

Body meets dress---dress meets body [collection?]  
Spring/Summer 1997  
Nylon, urethane, goosedown and feather  
Collection: Kyoto Costume Institute, AC9410  
PHOTO: YASUSHI ICHIKAWA, COURTESY KCI

### Catwalk, Spring/Summer 1997, Paris

PHOTO: JEAN FRANÇOIS JOSÉ, COURTESY OF COMME DES GARÇONS

### Catwalk Spring/Summer 1997, Paris

Body meets dress---dress meets body [collection?]  
Materials/technique [Polyester organdie]  
PHOTO: JEAN FRANÇOIS JOSÉ, COURTESY OF COMME DES GARÇONS





# TOKIO KUMAGAI

1948–87, born Sendai

## Body meets dress

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### Taberu Kutsu (Shoes to eat) series

About 1984

Resin made in imitation beef [[Resin; imitation beef??]]

Collection: Kyoto Costume Institute AC7558

PHOTO: MAYAYUKI HAYASHI, COURTESY KCI???

### Sandals, Taberu Kutsu (Shoes to eat) series

About 1984

Resin made in imitation red bean [and] rice [[Resin; imitation red beans and rice??]]

Collection: Kyoto Costume Institute AC7560

PHOTO: MAYAYUKI HAYASHI, COURTESY KCI???

### Shoes, Taberu Kutsu (Shoes to eat) series

About 1984

Resin made in imitation [ice-cream] sundaes [[Resin; imitation ice-cream sundaes??]]

Collection: Kyoto Costume Institute AC7561

PHOTO: MAYAYUKI HAYASHI, COURTESY KCI???

### Mouse shoes ??? TBC/ PHM collection



# ISSEY MIYAKE

b 1938, Hiroshima

## A piece of cloth

Issey Miyake is a major figure in international fashion and one of the first Japanese fashion designers to gain such recognition. He graduated as a graphic designer from Tama Art University in Tokyo before enrolling with the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, working as an assistant to Guy Laroche and Hubert de Givenchy from 1966 to 1969. While in Paris he witnessed the 1968 student demonstrations, which led him to think about designing clothes that were more democratic. He worked briefly in merchandising, with fashion designer Geoffrey Beene in New York, before setting up his Miyake Design Studio (MDS) in Tokyo in 1970, at a time when Japan was undergoing profound cultural and economic changes. Critic Mark Holborn has written that Miyake's career corresponds exactly to the recovery of the nation: 'The prevalent Americanisation of the occupation was replaced by the possibility of an independent Japanese culture which accommodated both native and western traditions with a new modernity.'

From the beginning, Miyake's team at MDS set about researching Japanese folk culture, traditional textiles and ancient clothing [[dressmaking??]] techniques such as wrapping and layering. One of Miyake's preoccupations is to create garments that would seem to have been made from a single piece of cloth with no visible seams or fastenings. During the 1970s garments in his series entitled A piece of cloth were each essentially a square with sleeves. With their minimalist appearance, these clothes were in the spirit of the kimono rather than that of Western clothing. In Western tailoring, cloth is cut to the shape of the body and sewn, and the space between body and garment is eliminated. In the kimono tradition, the dimensions of the garment are unchanging; the cloth wraps the body and the surplus is left hanging. In discussing his approach to clothing and its connection with the body, Miyake has said:

I am interested in the space between the body and the clothes so that the body can feel entirely at ease. Because each person's body shape is different, this space creates an individual form. It also gives the wearer freedom of movement for body and spirit.

The outfit opposite illustrates the type of hybrid garment that became identified with Japanese fashion during the 1980s. The oversized or 'one-size-fits-all' outfit is made up of a coat dress worn over a jacket. The textured and patterned fabric in browns and black has a homespun look. Loosely enveloping the body, the coat crosses and folds at the front and is sashed at the waist by lengths of knitted wool. The completed anti-structural look is built up in layers to create volume and form.

## Outfit

Autumn/Winter 1984 [83/84? or 84/85]  
Shirt, dress, headwrap, tights and shoes  
Wool, cotton, linen

Collection: National Gallery of Australia 85.244.1-5  
Photo: name?, National Gallery of Australia

[Detail of above]

