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Visual Essay – Internationalism and the avant-garde in Japanese fashion

Japanese Modernism Across Media

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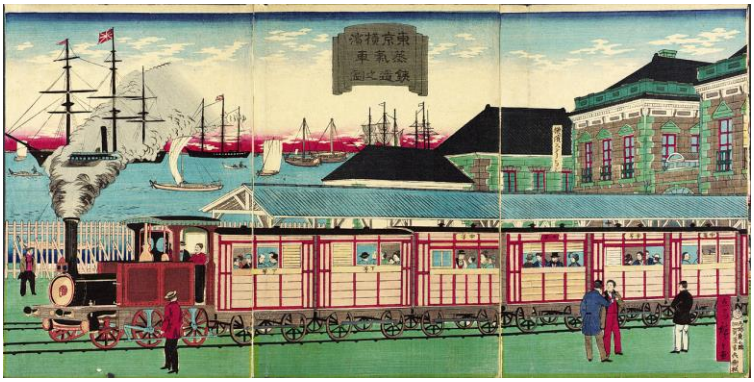
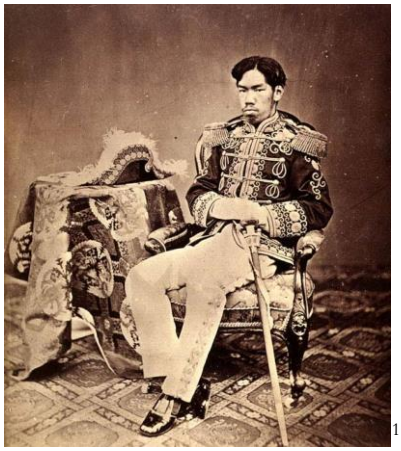
Fashion "is not created in a vacuum, but exists in a specific cultural and organizational context," (Yuniya 2004) making it a particularly useful vehicle to study the themes which are going to be examined here, namely the relationship of Japanese high fashion to modernism. Before embarking on this discussion, it is also worthwhile to note that *fashion* itself as a term is a cultural construct which diametrically apposes that of clothing. Clothing is the everyday, whereas fashion is the elite, the best, and the highest form of expression via clothing. Importantly, it must be recognized as such – there must be a common consensus on what comprises fashion, versus what is just clothing. Thus, I seek to examine the recognition of fashion (and examine the actors and institutions involved in this recognition) in this essay, and not just to examine fashion itself. In *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion,* Yuniya Kawamura establishes the high fashion culture to be strongly rooted in France by means of examining the history and institutions associated with Paris Fashion Week (Yuniya 2004). Thus, high fashion has historically been rooted in Western conceptions of the term, and cloaked in Western associations, since its inception. I will argue that the designers being discussed here – Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto – used their international exposure and the initial controversy it created to go beyond what might have been expected of them in that arena, creating a recognizably oppositional mode of fashion from the Western norms, thereby ushering high fashion into a new and previously unexplored dialogue between East and West. This new era of international fashion fundamentally destabilized the old institutional structures of the West.

I would like to begin this discussion by setting the stage, that is, the historical context which preceded the moment of modernism in the 1970's. As early as the Meiji, the Japanese had taken up a fascination with wearing western style clothing, shown in wood-block prints such as Utagawa Hiroshige III, *Steam Train: Tokyo-Yokohama*, 1875. Another famous example is the image of the Meiji Emporer dressed and looking marginally uncomfortable in Western attire, pictured below.





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Similarly, the West had already had exposure to Eastern styles of dress through the contact of explorers such as Marco Polo, and the historical trade route of the silk road (Martin and Koda 1994). There was also the forum of the World's Fairs/World's Exhibitions which, while piqueing ever more interest in Japan as a potential world power or uniter of Eastern culture, could not seem to provide a thorough representation of Japanese culture, because there were national interests at stake. It was clear that demand for access to Japanese goods (such as clothing and fabric like silk) were a major reason that the Americans forced the Japanese to open their ports to trade in the first place. Throughout the twentieth century, increasing contact and sharing between the East and the West and sharing of artistic and cultural practices enabled oppositional ideals to occupy an international space together, a space which had not existed before the contact and trade agreements were

[1] Note on photographs: these were sourced from our class slideshows posted on Moodle, though this is clearly not the original source of the image itself.

established in the Meiji. In fact, Eastern inspired designs from Western designers began appearing as early as the 1930's, such as "Jeanne Lanvin's dress with a bolero jacket which simulates kimono sleeves" (Yuniya 2004). Thus, the infatuation and curiosity was mutual between Eastern and Western styles of dress.

Although it is not my intention to present material redundant to my virtual exhibition, a short introduction of the designers and the initial reactions to their work is in order to begin discussing the themes with which they confronted the international audience of the high fashion world in the 70's and 80's.

Since Yohji Yamamoto (sometimes referred to by his collection name Y) "came on the scene, his once radical ideas have excited colleagues as diverse as Watanabe, Takahashi, and Margiela… His odd shapes and skewed proportions have informed an entire generation of Belgians … his designs are turning up in collections as unalike as those of Marc Jacobs and Miuccia Prada" (O'Flaherty, 2009). He is often discussed in concert with Kawakubo because not only were they born just two years apart and attended the same private university in Japan (Keio University), but they actively collaborated and competed with one another, Yamamoto referring to Kawakubo as his 'very strong competition' and 'the start of [his] Olympic games" (Menkes 2000). Both he and Rei Kawakubo are credited with creating the deconstructionist movement throughout the 1980's, "characterized by monochromatic, asymmetrical and baggy looks" (Yuniya 2004) which took hold as a movement and category internationally, such as the aforementioned influence on Belgian fashion. Unfortunately, most of the press releases which originally rejected their collection occurred in the aftermath of their 1981 debut at Paris Fashion Week are all in French, otherwise they would most certainly be addressed here. However, some critics referred to their original collection's designs in the mid 80's as 'The Day After' and 'Post Hiroshima,' which had the effect of devaluing and even

disrespecting the designer's inspiration and heritage (Withers 1987). Yet, all of the attention proved to be a blessing in disguise. Because of the sheer level of contempt at their audacity to break away from Western norms, they gained a massive amount of publicity, which Kawakubo referred to in an interview as "a little game to put ourselves on the map" (Seguret 1988). Kawakubo's saucy quote indicates the level of agency the designers employed to enter the fashion scene in the manner they did; they did not simply "appear out of nowhere" in the international context, and they did deliberately plan their grand entrance. There was an incredible change of reception towards these designers by the time the 90's came around, with "retailers rush[ing] to Yamamoto's showroom and [standing] in front of the surround mirrors to experiment with twisting, turning, and draping some of the exquisitely complicated pieces from his spring collection" (Foley 1998).

Issey Miyake likewise rose to the forefront of Japanese fashion in the seventies and eighties, making statements in Paris and London fashion weeks with powerful and oppositional avant-garde statements, incorporating never before seen techniques, and became a pioneer of high fashion. He was a student at the Bunka School of Fashion and graduated with a degree in graphic design. His minimalism and emphasis on form rather than flashy color highlighted that connection to Yamamoto and Kawakubo that distinguished modern Japanese fashion in the eyes of the world, and therefore became part of a cohesive genre. An example which demonstrates both of the aforementioned points with respect to the international gaze is the iconic black turtleneck by Miyake, worn by Steve Jobs, which comprised a major part of Jobs' public image and presentation. These iconic contributions by the modern Japanese avant-garde fashion elite cemented their status as global fashion icons, with recognizable styles.

Importantly, Miyake, Yamamoto and Kawakubo all rebelled against several norms which existed in the world of Western fashion. Firstly, they rejected many notions of normative gender and

sexuality in their fashion designs, taking cues instead from their cultural heritage, "very much in keeping with the traditional Japanese garment, the kimono. The garments were loose fitting, and untailored to reduce or eliminate any element of sexuality. By obliterating the notion of glamour, usually associated with decoration and detail, and thereby diminishing the element of status, usually visibly evident by a display of wealth […] these designers helped to change the face of fashion irrevocably" (English 2011, 45). Thus, English describes on the one hand a cultural continuity (Japanese emphasis on tradition), and on the other hand, a sense of complete postmodernism. The joining of these forces produced not only an original outcome in terms of fashion design, but engendered a sense of almost "take it **and** leave it" in Japanese modernism. What I mean by this is that these designers continued to emphasize traditions when relevant, but simultaneously broke away from traditions they perceived to be outdated such as binary gender roles and constructions. Who knew fashion could be such a successful vehicle for accomplishing the challenging, breaking, and reformation of societal boundaries? Likewise, support from the West and other worldwide feminist movements (that English touches upon in her chapter on Kawakubo) also surely emboldened the claims made about gender and identity by these designers, as well as enabling the participation and success of women like Kawakubo in the first place. Of the three designers, Kawakubo is most often discussed as a feminist artist, though this categorization could be equally true of Yamamoto and/or Miyake.

At the same time as they were challenging international gender norms, the other effect of divorcing high fashion from status symbolism and 'the obliteration of glamour' mentioned previously challenged the very basis of commercialized Western fashion, which was rooted in material culture and capitalism. Yamamoto, Kawakubo and Miyake all were raised in the context of a poverty stricken, post-war Japan, and although Japan came out of their economic depression as these designers reached adulthood, the poverty and hardship they experienced remained an

inspirational and motivational aspect of their work, something they celebrated instead of being ashamed (shame being a typical Western reaction to poverty). "Pleats, Please," a Miyake collection of 1993, some examples of which are shown on Miyake's page in my virtual exhibition, let Miyake "find a new way to give individuality to today's mass-produced clothing" (Saiki 1992). Deconstructing commercialism also gave them new methods for exploring individual identity by means of fashion, which was something the Western world had not previously considered. Kawakubo, for instance, sought to "question the [entire] notion of perfection as something positive and beautiful" (Sudjic 1990). Thus, the designers questioned the very ideals which were generally accepted to be what individuals (and fashion designers) should strive for in their work and in their presentation to the world.

Detaching accoutrements from their commercial value allowed for a final thematic impact upon international fashion by these designers, namely, they were empowered to reconfigure and re-conceptualize design and display practices outside of the monetary valuations of their designs. They found tension with both what people considered to be fashion, and how they considered it to be fashion. Muschamp reviewed an Issey exhibition in 1999, describing his experience therein: "As you walk past, your movement activates a mechanism that reels the dresses swiftly up to the ceiling and lets them float down like gaily colored parachutes. The room is constantly in motion, animated by what looks like a parody of that old fashion game of rising and falling hemlines" (Muschamp 1999). This description elicits almost Gutai Group-like elements of display practice (and due to the active, in-motion format, it would be unsurprising to me if they actually had been influenced by Gutai exhibitions), certainly unlike anything the fashion world knew. Furthermore, there was the suggestion that Muschamp made that it "looks like a parody of that old fashion game," which, when analyzed further, could be Issey's critique of the Western way of rapidly disposing of trends. Exhibition and display practices like this forced the high fashion world to recognize the artistic

nature of their profession, and challenged designers worldwide to be more forward thinking and innovative with respects to the artistic side of fashion as opposed to the marketable trends of clothing, and also challenged them to locate their clothing in a greater context. They asked the question, "Where and how do you want your clothing to be seen?" and gave their response by taking part multiple exhibitions (in addition to the storefronts and catwalks upon which their designs were already displayed) in museums across the world.

In conclusion, these three Japanese designers took the international fashion scene by storm, presenting an alternative to the mainstream approach (and therefore avant-garde) response to the previously undisputed norms of Western fashion. They stayed strong as a group by maintaining their authenticity with regards to the themes they originally came to Paris to question, such as gender and sexuality, commercialism, and display/design practices, among others. Their challenge to the international world was taken up enthusiastically, and thus, they are influential not only as 'Japanese' designers, but they are in every respect international and iconic themselves. So where does it go from here? Interestingly, I see the work of these three designers as a predecessor to much of the discussion which illuminates fashion about gender and sexuality in fashion today – currently making the headlines are the status of LGBTQ models, the growing acceptance of transsexual models, and an enduring movement towards the androgynous as a sexual ideal.

These microcosms of Japanese modernism that we have studied, the different genres of art (fashion included) and their changes over time, as well as the shaping of Japanese modernism via technological innovation, have shed light on the significance of Japanese modernism as a field of study. As art and mediums progressively looked forward in Japan, with all kinds of artists, intent on expressing 'uniqueness' usually as pertained to their identity as Japanese, they created an exceptional culture which interested and gained the respect of the global West, affirming their status as a global

power (though this statement only pertains to the arts, in the scope of my argument). More importantly, the global dialogue between East and West which I have established as occurring with fashion has proliferated throughout the myriad of art forms, bringing countless multi-cultural milieu into sharp relief across mediums. Cross cultural comparisons not only bring the world together in closer understanding, but also provide alternative understandings of identity and social politics which can reshape notions preconceived around cultural constructs, such as fashion.

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