

“Kawaii” Saves the World? Girls’ Fashion from Harajuku, Tokyo

Interviewer: Yoshihiro KATAOKA

As I walked into “6%DOKIDOKI,” a shop in Harajuku, Tokyo, I was flabbergasted at the sight of vividly colored apparel and shining accessories. A carousel pony was sitting in the small shop, giving it a somewhat dreamy air. Director/playwright/actress Sofia Coppola, who once was here, took note of the shop’s radically unique Japanese sense, observing, “You can find a shop like this only in Japan, nowhere else.” The peculiar sense has become a universal *kawaii* culture cherished by young people around the world. I had to ponder what exactly is the sense that is part mysterious, part lovely and, above all, eye-catching? What makes *kawaii* fashion so attractive to youths? I interviewed visual director Sebastian Masuda, the owner of 6%DOKIDOKI and a global advocate of *kawaii* fashion.



Sebastian Masuda

Cool, Far Off, Sharp

The made-in-Japan *kawaii* fashion attracts young people in the West in much the same way as *manga* and *anime* did before, doesn’t it? This summer, you were holding fashion/talk shows and opening shops in five cities across the globe, actively sending out *kawaii* culture to the world, following last year’s tours of the United States and Europe. What kind of local response did you get?

Masuda: As we opened 6%DOKIDOKI in San Francisco for a one-month period last year, the poster of “shopgirl” Yuka had already been put up everywhere, making her famous there. Japanese *manga* and *anime* have been accepted fairly widely and people were turning their attention from characters to their fashion and lifestyle that lies in the background.

So, when they saw Yuka, a small girl with round eyes and *anime* character’s looks, people there seemed to think that she came from a different world. Her popularity was enormous. As for us, we were also far more respected there than in Japan, so much so that we felt like staying there forever.

Unlike ordinary artists’ tours organized by local promoters, our overseas tours were organized free of charge by local fans who really want to touch the genuine *kawaii* culture. We take care of each and every step of the way as if producing everything by hand, keeping in good touch with local people. Young generations seem to be able to develop human relationship on the Internet, but they are also looking for a much closer relationship. Wherever we go, we are greeted by very passionate fans waiting for us. That gives us power and confidence.

It is not just in the West. As we have many fans in Asia, too, we are currently contemplating plans which definitely include tours of Asia in the near future.

How has *kawaii* culture developed in the first place and how have you been involved?

Masuda: I was in the world of contemporary art, leading an avant-garde performance group. I wanted to have a permanent place of self-expression, not like stage performance that is essentially of temporary



Author’s shop “6% DOKIDOKI” is full of “kawaii” items. Shopgirl “Yuka” (right) is the icon for the world’s “kawaii” lovers. “Vani” (left) has been chosen by a TV program contest.

nature. So, in 1995, I opened a shop in Harajuku to sell the kind of toys, sundries and used clothing of the world that I personally found interesting.

Themes are “color and an impact.” With designer brands at their height then, monochrome fashion was prevailing. I wanted to counter it by showing colorful stuff. The concept, which I called “sensational lovely,” began to be noticed after the visit by director Coppola.

In 2005, I extended my activities to art, including visual shows and events, in addition to running the shop. As I was doing so, I clearly defined my concept, targeting girls aged 18 to 23.

In 2008, I organized a culture event in Harajuku, putting together *kawaii* characters from all around the world for the first time, igniting the *kawaii* boom originating in Harajuku.

So, the *kawaii* culture we advocate is that of Harajuku alone and does not necessarily represent the entire *kawaii* culture of Japan.

The *kawaii* sense as accepted in the West is more like a “cool” one than just a “fancy” one in Japan. It is cool, far off and sharp. Some girls gathering at overseas events wear tattoos, for example.

Defying Monochrome World

What made Harajuku the bastion of *kawaii* fashion? What made the local fashion as powerful as to influence the youth of the world?

Masuda: Girls in Harajuku turn an ordinary fashion into an original expression. For example, some girls put hair ribbons on bags or on the bosom of clothing. Other girls wear a one-piece suit over another. They don't conform to rules or categories and mix things together, creating styles of their own. They have a sense that is free and flexible, one that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

In the world of mass production and mass consumption, young people used to wear clothes in fashion as they were given. As they saw their peers in Harajuku, however, they realized that it was okay to arrange clothes as they like or do things as they please.

It does not end in fashion. In today's world of money games, “the richer, the happier” is the prevailing sense of value. But the young generation also feels that there is something wrong with it and that something ought to be different. I think that by means of fashion, which is a means of self-expression after all, girls saw a different way of life – happiness varies according to individuals and it is okay to look for each one's own happiness.

In the last half of the 1960s, youths called for “love and peace” in protest against the war in Vietnam. On the US West Coast, the so-called “Flower Movement” took place, with hippies in the middle, giving birth to a very colorful culture. It was an antithesis to the monochrome world of war.

Today, we also live in a chokingly monochrome world with rampant acts of terrorism and war. So, I believe there is something common between the power of the Flower Movement in the 1960s and that of the Harajuku girls today. I would say what once happened on the US West Coast is happening in Harajuku now.



Author's concept of “sensational lovely” spreads through visual shows like this.

“Never to Become an Adult”

***Kawaii* culture has a characteristic tinge of childishness or infanthood, doesn't it?**

Masuda: Today's youngsters feel that growing up to be an adult means giving up. They don't believe in the future. They don't want any part of it. It is not that they cherish childishness per se. Childishness is an unconscious choice, an attempt to refuse to grow up. They feel they are never going to grow into adulthood.

I believe they love a world of colors and are attracted to an expression of childish tinge as an unconscious resistance and opposition to the monochrome world grownups have built. I think it would be a mistake to interpret *kawaii* as a message of “healing” or “comfort” alone.

Kawaii fashion has been generously accepted in Japan, but elsewhere in the world, in France, for example, women involved in that sort of fashion would no doubt be subjected to criticism. Europe has a firm tradition of culture. *Kawaii* women would be considered as someone up against the authentic and correct norm. In that sense, the *kawaii* fashion of Harajuku has something in common with the punk fashion of London in the 1970s.





Scenes from the 2009 event in San Francisco: The youths might have felt a Japanese atmosphere there, standing in line properly before the start of the event.

Without the outfits, the girls would feel destined to become one of those gray-colored grownups. Otherwise, they cannot protect themselves. They feel “the hell with provided stuff.” They think “we have a culture and a way of life of our own.” It is their statement that “we live here.”

So, I look at *kawaii* as a very positive expression, even a radical one for that matter. In my view, the young generation collectively has a certain amount of energy, not much different than in any era. When society is rich and well provided for, which way should they direct their energy? Youths do not know. I think that’s where *kawaii* culture comes in.

World in Need of Japanese Sense

You’re trying to direct the youth energy to society, free from the confines of self-expression such as fashion, aren’t you?

Masuda: I saw TV news on the big quake in Sichuan, China, in 2008. The news was about the early reopening of a school after school buildings collapsed and many children died. Children came to school with sad faces, but when they received stationery donated by a toy maker and saw cartoon characters printed on them, the children beamed with joy. If the stationery was plain with no character on it, would they have shown such big smiles as they did? It dawned on me then that *kawaii* may have a tremendous power, much bigger than we think.

I wondered if there were any means possible to connect with the world, taking advantage of *kawaii*. That’s how I came up with the subtitle “*Kawaii Saves the World!*” for a cultural event in Harajuku, keeping part of admission fees to buy vaccines for children around the world. But, charity seemed to

me a thing of a distant world, without much reality. So, I went to Cambodia by myself and, after trials and errors, talked UNICEF officials into letting me enter a vaccine storage area and see vaccines with my eyes.

A volunteer organization seemed to appreciate my initiative and invited me to vaccination places in Myanmar. I went there, guarded by soldiers carrying guns, and personally gave oral vaccines to children. The person moved most by *kawaii* power turned out to be nobody else but me. I was able to see for certain that *kawaii* has the power to connect with the world.

To put it plainly, young girls today show no interest in anything other than love and fashion. Probably, it is a universal tendency true of the world. That is because both love and fashion are geared toward oneself. As an artist, I believe that fashion can initiate communication, however. For example, an earring sold at my shop has five designed

Japanese letters dangling from it, reading “*arigato* (thank you).” If someone asked a girl wearing it “What does it say?” then communication would start. A product of the fashion world, which is essentially geared toward oneself, *kawaii* still has the potential of connecting with others or opening up to society.



Will you elaborate on the potential? How does it change the world and what kind of role will it play?

Masuda: At the San Francisco shop we opened last year, girls were spontaneously lining up for checkout, which was quite different from what we heard about American shoppers. None of them spat out gum and some even tried to speak in Japanese. The girls all seemed to show their respect for Japanese culture as they entered the shop. American people involved in the shop seemed to find it most surprising.

I realized that the ordinary sense naturally possessed by Japanese people can be accepted in the rest of the world. Moreover, I realized what the world needs most is the Japanese sense that the world does not possess. It is compassion for others, a delicate way of handling things, and a courteous attitude respecting good manners.

Japanese will not be able to appreciate how important this sort of sense is as long as they stay in Japan. I realized it for the first time as I went overseas. I think Japanese may proudly say, “We line up” or “We don’t say yes or no, but we care.” The important thing is that foreign youths who get used to Japanese *manga* and *anime* possess the sense now. I think the role I should play is to communicate the ordinary sense of Japanese to the rest of the world.

J.S.

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