

# The Worldliness of Japanese Fashion Designs

By Fukai Akiko

PEOPLE around the world are enjoying sushi and reading Japanese *manga* (comic books). Christian Dior is producing kimono-like dresses, Gucci is decorating show windows with *ukiyo-e* (Japanese wood block prints), and Louis Vuitton is using wind-blown cherry blossom patterns. An interest in things Japanese, which saw a resurgence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, first took a prominent place on the world stage during the “Japonisme” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which had an extensive and penetrating impact on Europe and the United States in fields ranging from art to lifestyles to fashion. Today, things Japanese have become synonymous with creativity on the world fashion scene, and this can be attributed to the prominent position held by Japanese fashion designs.

Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute  
Photo: Takashi Hatakeyama



Christian Dior dress (2001 Spring/Summer) – the Goshoguruma pattern is printed on silk jacquard with a Japanese flower motif



## 1980s: Focus on Japanese Power

Takada Kenzo was a popular designer in Paris in the 1970s when haute couture began to give way to prêt-à-porter. His “KENZO” brand is now recognized worldwide as part of the LVMH group. In 1974, Miyake Issey developed “clothing made from a single piece of material” designed according to the same concept as the Japanese kimono, in other words, clothing with a flat structure.

However, Japanese fashion design began to convey greater strength in the early 1980s when Kawakubo Rei (with the COMME des GARÇONS brand) and Yamamoto Yohji appeared on the scene in Paris. Their baggy and asymmetrical clothing, which seemed from a Western perspective to lack shape, was described as looking “like the remnants of clothing after a bomb had exploded,” and its impact shook the Parisian fashion world. Their avant-garde designs, which stood in stark contrast to the beautiful silhouettes and colors of Western clothing, were said to have a “tattered look” or, because of their frequent use of monotonous colors like grays and blacks, a “crow-like” character.

These austere designs, which eliminated adornments and beautiful colors in favor of monotonous tones, were said to embody a Japanese aesthetic sense of “*wabi-sabi*” (simplicity and plainness). These paved the way for the rise of “minimalism” in the 1980s. In this decade, Japan was at the height of its spectacular economic development. Finding themselves in the spotlight, the Japanese produced striking achievements in design fields like architecture and graphic design. Japanese fashion in particular had a strong impact during this time.

Japanese designers are known worldwide for their highly creative fashions.

Kawakubo remains committed to creating “new clothing that has never been seen before,” and continues to inspire new generations of designers around the world. Yamamoto is involved in multiple business lines. He is moving toward haute couture, but in recent years he has joined up with the global firm Adidas to develop his attractive “Y-3” sportswear. Miyake has developed groundbreaking ideas, such as Pleats Please and A-POC, which fundamentally challenge traditional methods of apparel manufacturing that involve the use of patterns and the cutting and sewing of fabric. Younger Japanese designers like Watanabe Junya are also receiving a great deal of worldwide acclaim.

### Kawaii (Cute)

Japanese popular art, manga and *anime* (animated films) are parts of a contemporary Japanese culture that is gaining worldwide attention and is even influencing the fashion world. The images and characters of manga and anime, such as Astro Boy, Hello Kitty and Robo-kun, have appeared directly on clothing.

They have the kind of mass appeal, juvenility, accessibility, questionable taste and sordid quality that have captured the hearts of people around the world.

It is worth pointing out that manga has had a significant impact on the unique street fashions seen in the Shibuya and Harajuku districts of Tokyo. The young women who hang out there tend to dress in cute fashions reminiscent of little girls. According to the *Kojien* dictionary, “*kawaii*” (cute) is defined as “something with a youthful or juvenile quality, or something small in size that makes one want to handle it with care.” Dior’s John Galliano, for example, is intrigued by the disorderliness of the unique, eccentric fashions of Harajuku, and reflects this character in his own designs.

### Tradition and Avant-Garde: 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Louis Vuitton commissioned Murakami Takashi, the most popular Japanese artist overseas today, to help produce its 2003 Spring/Summer bag designs. His superflat designs have a two-dimensional character based on traditional Japanese concepts that shocked Western artists such as Edouard Manet, Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They used a wide array of colors to suit the tastes of the liquid crystal display (LCD) generation and, above all, have a manga-esque “*kawaii*” quality to them that makes them popular worldwide. Louis Vuitton’s typical



The character of Astro Boy printed on clothing (2004 Spring/Summer Tokyo collection)

monogram designs were originally developed under the influence of the Japonisme of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but those Japanese roots were strengthened by Murakami’s contributions. From “*wabi-sabi*” to the cuteness of “*kawaii*,” Japanese aesthetics are combining a new sense of modernity with tradition, and are gaining widespread recognition all over the world. **JS**



Louis Vuitton’s “MULTI-COLORE MONOGRAM Speedy 30,” which appeared in 2003 Spring/Summer collection

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