

# Making Japanese Fashion a World Standard

## – The Role of “Japan Fashion Week” –

Interviewer: Kokubo Tamaki

In the autumn of 2005, the Japanese apparel industry inaugurated the “Japan Fashion Week in Tokyo” to promote Japanese fashion abroad, an unprecedented undertaking that brought together designers, textile makers, apparel producers and retailers. Issey Miyake Inc. President Ota Nobuyuki, a member of the Fashion Strategy Forum sponsoring the 4th Japan Fashion Week (JFW) this March, talks to *Japan SPOTLIGHT* about the significance of the JFW project, which was undertaken at the initiative of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

**The JFW began in the fall of 2005 with the aim of promoting Japanese fashion in the world as something representative of Japanese culture and industry. You have experience working as a fashion buyer overseas, and now you manage a firm as president of Issey Miyake Inc. From these two perspectives, how do you see the status of Japanese fashion in the world now?**

Ota: I feel that right now, the position of Japanese fashion is on the decline in the Western world. When we look back at the past, there were two major occasions when Japan made its presence felt in the West. The first was in the 1970s with the work of Takada Kenzo and Miyake Issey. The *KENZO* brand won the same kind of popularity as creations by Yves San Laurent, then the high priest of Western fashion. I think Takada was the first fashion creator from the East who could compete head to head with the “Paris thoroughbreds.” Miyake breathed fresh air into Paris with his “a piece of cloth” (A-POC) creation and he made clothes based on traditional Japanese skills and spirit. Yamamoto Kansai, who worked in London, gave the Japanese sense of “*hare*” (festive) color in *kimono* to his psychedelically colored clothes and left a big footprint in the youth culture at that time. By blending the Japanese cultural heritage into their creations, these three fashion creators sent a clear message to the world that there are designers outside



Ota Nobuyuki, President of Issey Miyake Inc.

the West.

Then in the 1980s, Kawakubo Rei of *Comme des Garçons* and Yamamoto Yohji caused a sensation creating clothes having an asymmetrical look or those with hems left ragged and loose. These garments were a shock and overturned the Western aesthetic sense from its very roots. Kawakubo and Yamamoto made their debuts in New York; later they moved to Paris, where they created a strong impact on the way young designers made clothes, particularly in

Europe. It is not an exaggeration to say that what these Japanese designers did to Western fashion was historic. And their influence continued for more than 10 years. But since then, Japanese fashion has not evolved. This is how Japanese fashion stands in the world today. After Japanese fashion made a big bang in the 1980s, Japan has not been able to come up with the next big thing.

## No Generation Shift Yet in Japan

**What do you think is the reason for this?**

Ota: When the impact you created is revolutionary, the walls then become bigger and taller, and it becomes exceedingly difficult for designers of the next generation to overshoot you. It requires a great deal of energy. Not only in Japan, but across the world as well, many young designers started to show their stuff in the 1980s. Yet, in France, no designer greater than Jean Paul Gaultier has appeared. In the United States, it is only recently that Marc Jacobs and Michael Kors have come to rival the three greats – Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. In Italy, the transition of power to the next generation has taken place a little earlier, and there are Prada, Dolce & Gabbana and Jil Sander.

Photo: PANA



A scene from a Tokyo fashion show staged in 2005 as part of the first Japan Fashion Week in a tent pitched outside the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery in the Outer Garden of Meiji Shrine.

### That kind of generational shift has not taken place in Japan yet?

Ota: Not yet. Unfortunately it looks as if it will take a little more time. I think this is probably because management philosophy on brand products in Europe and the United States is different from the Japanese concept. There, brand businesses are operated like listed companies, where the theory of capitalism rules. In Japan, many of the brands are run like family businesses. No actual family ties may exist, but Japanese fashion houses take pride inheriting the founder's design spirit. Apparently there are very few similar cases elsewhere in the world. At Issey Miyake, inhouse-trained talents such as Tsumori Chisato have been allowed to establish their own brands under separate companies. By contrast, at *Comme des Garçons*, the brand is being assigned to different designers such as Watanabe Junya and Kurihara Tao. Whatever talent the younger designers may possess, they must develop within the perimeter set by the pioneer of a particular fashion house. When we take the age of these pioneers into account, this system will likely fade out in the next 10 years or so. Perhaps it will be then that Japanese fashion of the 21st century really begins.

### When seen from a business perspective, does the Japanese economic slump of the 1990s – the so-called “lost decade” – have anything to do with the fact that few new talents have emerged?

Ota: I think it has a lot to do with it. When the market shrank along with the economic slump, Japanese companies began making low-cost products, products that posed little business risk. This led to a loss of opportunities for fashion creators. Then, as land prices in Japan plunged, the big guns from abroad set up shops here in aggressive style, and the fashion market ballooned in an extraordinary manner. Japan became the market where overseas brands could make a kill the way they chose. Recently, however, sales of foreign brands are reportedly beginning to slacken, and consumers are starting to look for new things. I'm hopeful that a new era in Japanese fashion will soon dawn.

## JFW's Message: Go Global

Under the circumstances, what sort of role can the Japan Fashion Week play?

Ota: It is to make the Japanese fashion industry aware that we must turn our eyes to the world. So far, Japanese fashion houses have somehow managed to survive by relying on whatever energy to spare from the affluent Japanese market. As for the overseas market, the stance of many Japanese fashion companies is that they would go abroad if they had enough corporate energy left in the domestic market that remains their bedrock. From now on, things will have to change. Take European brands, for example. In Europe, with the integration of the EU market, business has become borderless, and European fashion houses are constantly aware of the risk of being bought out. With the “offense is the best defense” principle, they began adopting global management strategies. And they are now training a new generation of designers from that point of view. That is what is lacking in Japanese companies. The 1990s has taught us clearly that there is no other way to survive than to go after the world market. So at the Japan Fashion Week, our message line is, “Go global.”

### Are there creations in Japan at present that can compete globally?

Ota: Yes, I think there are buds of talents with plenty of potential. What they lack is the skill to commercialize their creations. They don't have the basics to keep up with the cycle of international business. For example, Minagawa Akira of *Mina Perhonen* is an excellent designer. He has shown his work at the Paris Collection, and with his unique fabric designs, he can distinguish himself from European and American fashion designers. But he hasn't been able to muster the capital necessary to go global in a dynamic manner. One point I want to emphasize is that in Japan's big business the number of people willing to support talent has declined. The designers who broke through in the 1970s had the backing of top company executives who acted like *sumo* patrons. Now, business people in Japan behave pretty much like *salarymen*. For designers to absorb the risk of run-

ning a business is a very cruel thing to do. The backward-looking mind-frame of business managers is another legacy of our “lost decade”. But the economy is turning up recently, and more companies are putting money into capital investment. I think what companies will start doing next in the fashion world is to search for content, to ask for new creations. Major domestic apparel makers are involved in the running of the Japan Fashion Week and they seem to understand how important new creations are, so I’m hopeful.

## “Designers, Be Business-Minded,,

The Japan Fashion Week has been held three times so far, in the autumn of 2005 and in the spring and autumn of 2006. The third JFW was shortened to five days, and was held early, ahead the world’s major fashion shows staged first in New York and then London, Milan and Paris. What kind of results have you seen?

Ota: If you compare the JFW to mountain climbing, we have only made it to the second base camp. There is nothing yet we can call results. But since the 3rd Japan Fashion Week, JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) has taken up the task of sending information overseas and that has been a great help to us. As for our move to become the season-opener, there has been no visible result to speak of. However, in the past we were the last major player in the world to hold a fashion show. The Tokyo Collection Week, which was how the Japanese fashion show had been known before the JFW came about, ran for more than a month. In addition to making the fashion show shorter, we’ve been able to hold the event nearly a month and a half earlier, and I think that has been an encouragement to young designers. I suppose you could say that one result of the JFW at the current stage is that Tokyo’s Council of Fashion Designers (CFD) has



From Japanese designer Homma Masaaki’s “mastermind JAPAN” 2006 spring/summer collection. Models appearing in “The Show!” include fashion creators, stylists, singers and athletes.

gained strength in its operations since it was established 20 years ago. Now that the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has taken the initiative and domestic companies are giving funding support, Japanese designers should now have the wherewithal to show off their stuff. I hope Japanese designers will become more ambitious and show the determination to find buyers on their own.

### Does that mean you want designers to be business-minded?

Ota: That’s right. The CFD has recently been reorganized, and the membership of young designers has risen dramatically. In line with that, many study meetings are being held on business matters, so I believe we can have high expectations. Through the JFW, more domestic apparel makers and designers are getting together to cooperate with each other. I think this spirit of collaboration with companies will take the place of corporate patronage of yesteryears. Let’s hope the funding Japanese designers get through such arrangements will help them run their brands.

### So do you think the JFW will also become a venue for selling Japanese fashion in the domestic market as well?

Ota: Yes. The JFW was given a large boost when the government set up the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters in the Cabinet Office and decided that fashion is one aspect of our culture that Japan should be proud of. Thanks to that, companies from various business sectors are taking an interest in Japanese fashion, seeing its potential to replace traditional industries such as steel and electrical machinery. Since I am a member of an expert research panel at the headquarters, I have been urging the government to take an active role to train personnel in the fashion industry. In a content business like fashion, people are what matters most. Belgium has a royal academy of fine art, which has produced all kinds of talent. I think it would be wonderful if national universities in Japan had departments specializing in fashion. **J.S**

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