

## How Foreign Journalists View Japanese Fashion (2)

# Is Fashion Still A Status Symbol?

By Micaela Fila



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Fashion buyers in Europe have changed their taste. In other words, fashion trends are developed on the basis of the country's culture and style. Whereas in Japan, fashion is still a status symbol, the more ostentatious you are the better.

Western fashion changes quickly. Japanese fashion changes even more rapidly. This is a consequence of the varying stages of maturity of consumers. Western fashion developed quickly after the memorable events of the 18th century and became re-dimensioned during the 19th century. Over the past 100 years the West has assimilated styles that were first created by Parisian dressmakers of *haute couture*, then by Italian dressmakers in "high fashion houses" who after a while passed on to ready-to-wear apparel and are now called "fashion designers."

The Western consumer has reached maturity. What does that mean? In Europe, after World War II, there was an economic and cultural growth which started in the 1950s. As the years passed

the cultural and economic development became even stronger. Once the problems of survival were resolved, the middle class discovered the comforts and luxuries of life.

According to the theory of Maslow on the hierarchy of one's needs, the individual, in addition to his or her physiological necessities such as safety, love and esteem, will also hanker after the gratification of self-achievement. Self-achievement is the fundamental incentive that makes people acquire products. This theory clearly shows that a hierarchy amongst our needs does exist and that from a previous need we pass on to a subsequent one. Society developed in such a way that the new social classes wanted to reinforce their social status with ostentatious behavior and by showing off their wealth.

As a consequence of this, fashion found an important place in everyday life. Due to a further cultural development and new forms of advertising, fashion has been substantially boosted and has succeeded in imposing itself, thus becoming an important and powerful status symbol. Fifty years ago, fashion designers were capable of proposing one style, from head to foot, and those who could afford it adhered without the bat of an eyelid.

Now in the West, times have changed, and consumers, after years of having fashion imposed, now prefer to think of ways of using the latest information to create a very personal style, e.g. wearing a pair of jeans by a well-known designer with a blouse likely bought in a flea market. Why is this so? In Europe we are going through a phase of contrasts – in certain snobbish spheres, well developed culturally, it is not considered chic to dress in *Prada* from head to foot because that would be too simple and well within the means of the *nouveau riche*. Therefore, it is better to wear a *Prada* handbag with a dress bought in a department store such as ZARA so as to show off one's own personality and background.

I point out, however, that all this

occurs because people in general have less money to spend on clothing and also because to be in fashion is less of a status symbol than before. In the West, the new status symbols are holidays, mobile phones, cars, etc.

### ■ From Quality to Quantity

Now let us speak about fashion with regard to quality. Fifty years ago fashion designers used materials of extraordinary quality and nearly all their clothes were made entirely by hand, ensuring both beautiful and excellent products. In those days, the middle classes bought an overcoat for the winter and an outfit for an important occasion. Their wardrobes were not as full as those of today because consumers had less necessity to "show off" – it was just enough "to be there." The growth in the consumer society has revolutionized buyers' mentality. The concept of quality has slowly been replaced by the concept of quantity.

Meanwhile, ready-to-wear fashion has become a mass phenomenon that is within everyone's reach. European consumers' wardrobes have progressively got larger and the need to communicate through what one is wearing has increased. Advertising has played an important role in spreading fashion through television, newspapers and the cinema. Also contributing to the trend have been the success of fashion shows in the main capitals of the fashion world and the icons proposed by opinion leaders, top models and the star system.

### ■ How to Buy Dreams

Nowadays one does not dress to cover oneself, but as a means of communicating one's "self" to others, and so fashion is a necessary and indispensable way of helping us to express our personality and of satisfying our dreams and yearnings.

Bernard Arnault, the owner of LVMH, the most powerful group in the

world selling luxury items, says: “We sell dreams, not products.” A consequence of this is the increasing importance attached to retailers and the relationship with clients. One should not interrupt the dream of a person entering a shop to be (or seem) younger and more beautiful, or more self-assured, more respected and admired, and seeking self-satisfaction, gratification and happiness. Post-modern consumers, especially those of the wealthier ranks because they are pursuing their desires and dreams, are greatly influenced by external stimuli. They are very interested in the latest and most original ideas and this explains the disloyalty of consumers compared to the past. Desires and curiosity tend to be attracted to areas that have not been tried before (products, trademarks, shops). In fact, today we speak of marketing experiences meaning the necessity to offer new experiences rather than new products.

Philosopher Zigmund Bauman notes that “while a need is always relative to ‘something’ (i.e. a product or service), a desire is always relative to the person ‘me’.” And for this reason – Bauman continues – a desire remains insatiable and may never be fulfilled. Therefore, knowing how to stimulate that desire, which is often unexpressed (of beauty, youth, being up-to-date, prestige, security, success, feeling reassured), is the way to make people “loyal” to a particular brand. There is also the case of a purchase made with forethought and in such a case the use of shopping experience is limited. This is valid for some exceptional products (but they are not more than about 100) and for “fashion victims.” There are also clients, particularly from the East or other up-and-coming countries arriving in Europe with shopping lists, who do not fall in line with this way of thinking.

### ■ Importance of Retail

It is most likely that businesses dealing with worldwide fashion no longer have to think in terms of products, but of the current lifestyle – it is necessary to take note of consumer desires and to observe

Photo: Japan Fashion Strategy Forum



Ne-net clothes unveiled during the 3rd Japan Fashion Week staged in September 2006

the changes in progress due to globalization. “The success of fashion houses,” says Domenico De Sole, chairman of the Tom Ford Group, “has come about due to the quality of their products, their creativity, their innovation and their attention to detail, but it has been consolidated by the coherent and skilful creation of the ‘retail network’.”

The retail network was conceived as a way to concentrate and realize the entire trademark strategy – “the moment of truth,” as De Sole calls it. Shops selling just one trademark and in particular flagships have become consumer areas not only for the products themselves but above all everything that is linked to the unique and indispensable identity of the trademark. Brands such as *Gucci*, *Prada*, *Armani*, *Tod’s*, *Versace*, *Ferragamo* and *Zegna* have created international networks under the banner of the globalization of a lifestyle and culture.

### ■ A Longing for Fashion

What is the situation in Japan? My recent trip to Tokyo for the Japan Fashion Week was an eye-opener. It is only 100 years since the wave of Western fashion swept through the country. I noticed that consumers are very eager to acquire “new styles” and “new identities.” The *kimono* has reigned for thousands of years, which probably limited the creative expression of their personalities. This “longing” for fashion can be noticed amongst the young people on the streets of Tokyo, who are “fashion victims” and, above all, have more buying power than their Western contemporaries. Everything goes – it just has to be “fashion.” Perhaps the moment for developing one’s personal style has not yet arrived in the East.

Fashion is still a status symbol. This is exactly what Japanese designers should concentrate on for the home market. Whereas everything has seemingly already been done for the Western market, it is an uphill climb. The winners will be those who communicate something that is really new, who impose the style at the right moment and at the right price, and who sell magnificent dreams together with their clothes.

In the West, there are no prejudices, bars of any kind or chauvinism. As we have seen, Western consumers are “disloyal.” They will willingly betray their favorite brand as long as their desire to change is aroused. There is room for success for anyone who is able to enter into the minds of consumers of the Third Millennium, for anyone who can stimulate the desire for clothing that we do not need just to cover ourselves but to express our personalities. Japanese designers such as Yamamoto Yohji, *Comme des Garçons*’ Kawakubo Rei and Miyake Issey have managed it. **JS**

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