

# Cycling through Tokyo: Contemporary Arts and New Trends in Fashion

By Catherine de Montferrand

## ■ All French citizens dream of visiting Japan

For most of my compatriots, the country of the rising sun remains a mystery. Indeed, we believe we know the Japanese: a lot of them visit our country. Quite often, we paint them with a camera in hand... But, please, let's not forget Japan's robots, *onsens* (spas), *manga*, martial arts and *sumo* wrestling... so many unknown assets that remain to be discovered by the French. When I knew we were going to Japan, I immersed myself in books in order to learn more about this fascinating country. One of those books was entitled: *traité sur les contradictions et les différences de moeurs* which could be roughly translated as "all about contradictions and different customs." The book explains how the Japanese people have often adopted for themselves do's and don'ts that completely differ from those of the rest of the world. Two examples of that: when we ride a horse, we climb up with the left leg. A Japanese rider does the opposite. Counting, we close our hand and take out one finger after the other. The Japanese do not proceed that way. They open their hand and close one finger after the other...

We arrived in Tokyo in the midst of winter, with much better weather than we left behind in Europe, and were welcomed by a beautiful light. I was astonished at first glance by this complex web of architecture and designs. So enthusiastic to discover this magical city, I bought a car, wanting to be independent, and went on my own

from one place to another. For hours I was lost trying to find my way back, so the next day the car was retired to a garage, and I bought a bicycle. Our stay in the Netherlands few years ago had probably convinced me to adopt this means of transport. But Tokyo is not as flat as The Hague. You need good legs, have to get used to riding on the pavement, and cannot park your bicycle anywhere at the risk of having it taken away to the pound. Nevertheless, this means of transport allows me to discover Tokyo district by district and to appreciate its variety.

Art work, by Miyake Shintaro,  
the author's property

**Contemporary art** shows a Japan in motion moving like the world, fleeting and increasingly subjective. Art is a tool of communication in the world, which makes understanding easier. The growing presence of Japanese art in the international art scene and the activities of art museums and art markets in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been very strong. I rode my bicycle to the recently opened Mori Art Museum and saw a very interesting exhibition called "Roppongi Crossing." This exhibition has been my first foray into Japanese contemporary art. The Hara Museum of Contemporary Art is another place I often go to. I had a chance to meet two young Japanese ladies, who eventually became friends. They had the kindness to take me around to discover the most fashionable and new meeting places for artists: the nearest galleries from my residence are the ones in Roppongi, which are as big as a handkerchief, and shows artists from around the world. Then you have a gallery complex in Shinkawa – an old warehouse that has been transformed into five galleries. I recently bought two pieces from young Japanese artists at one of them. There is also Scai The Bathhouse, old public baths in Yanaka, converted into a contemporary exhibition hall in the 90s, though unfortunately it is too far from my place to go on bicycle.

I also had the opportunity to go to Naoshima, in the Inland Sea, which you approach by ferry, a unique spot where contemporary artists from all over the planet visit. I warmly recommend visiting the island. You can stay in the hotel designed by Ando Tadao, overlooking the Inland Sea. If you are lucky, the owner will show you around the museum to look at the works of Richard Long, David Hockney and Sam Francis, and the Art House Project "Kadoya," by Miyajima Tatsuo, a well-known Japanese artist, who remodels old houses into art works open to the public.

**Fashion** : Tokyo streets, particularly in Shibuya or Harajuku, are fascinating. Young people enjoy themselves in the madness of dressing. The Bunka Fashion College is considered one of the top three in the world. The Japanese women are very neat, they surely spend a lot of time cultivating their image.

What struck me the most about Japanese fashion is its originality. Miyake Issey and Kawakubo Rei are really innovative. A-POC, a line by Miyake, produces endless lengths of new fabrics and computer-made patterns which allow you to cut your clothes in different variations. I have one of these A-POC outfits. I was so afraid to cut it down that I went back to the shop in Aoyama to seek





A sculpture by Otake Shinro (above) and a view from a hotel in Naoshima (below)



The 109 building in Shibuya (right)

advice from the assistant, and she laughed.

Of course, French fashion is seen in town and very popular but nowadays, many French designers get inspiration from Japanese trends. Look at Louis Vuitton, they have chosen Murakami Takashi for one of their lines.

It's really a pleasure to go around either Aoyama or Omotesando to see the boutiques of the best Japanese designers, look at the new shop "Colette meets Comme des Garçons," an affiliate of the famous "Colette" shop in Paris and Kawakubo. But I also like to go to the 109 building in Shibuya to enjoy window-shopping and look

at the new trends.

When my daughter, 22, came to visit us, she spent lots of time going around "La Forêt" or Harajuku.

What I do like the most in Japan is its will to remain itself. Fashion and past influences have always put Japan on the creative side. These traditional ideas have existed for centuries, and make Japan so rich. **JS**

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