

# The Butterfly Spreads Its Wings

Interview with  
Hanae Mori, designer,  
by Terry Trucco

The story has a fairy-tale ring to it. In bleak, postwar Japan, a young Tokyo housewife, bored at home, took fashion classes, rented a tiny studio over a noodle shop and launched a modest dressmaking business. Before long she was designing costumes for Japan's top film stars. It was only the beginning.

Today Hanae Mori's elegant, butterfly-strewn evening gowns, city suits and silk dresses are worn by princesses and company presidents, working women and the bright lights of society. Japan's Princess Hanako, Tsutako Nakasone, wife of the Japanese Prime Minister, television personality Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, singer Dionne Warwick and comedienne Joan Rivers all own Hanae Mori creations. So do thousands of other

women in Europe, America, Australia, the Middle East and Japan.

From that unprepossessing Shinjuku shop grew the more than ¥40 billion Hanae Mori fashion empire. At its core are *haute couture* and ready-to-wear fashion lines for women, as well as a galaxy of Mori-designed accessories—shoes, scarves, bedlinens, handbags, stockings, jewelry, children's wear and men's wear. Headquartered in a gleaming Omote-sando building designed by architect Kenzo Tange, the Hanae Mori holdings also boast a publishing company (Japanese versions of America's *Women's Wear Daily* and *Interview* magazine), hair cutting salons, tea rooms, flower shops, a French restaurant and Studio V, a youthful line of boutiques and fashions.

Her fashion factories are found in America, Hong Kong, France and most recently China in addition to Japan, where most Mori clothes and textiles are produced. Since 1977, Hanae Mori has also been a part of Paris' *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, the august society of high fashion houses that includes Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel, Givenchy and Ungaro.

The firm even turns out "designer" uniforms for such diverse enterprises as Japan Air Lines and a Kyoto taxi cab company.

Despite a staff of some 1,200, Hanae Mori's fashion empire is essentially a family enterprise. Husband Ken oversees business decisions, while son Akira handles publishing ventures and younger son Kei manages Studio V.



Hanae Mori



But it is Madame Mori, as she is often called, who has engineered the empire's creative decisions and whose talent, energy and drive have made this Japan's best-known high-fashion firm. Indeed, in Japan, where few women achieve business-world positions of power and influence, Hanae Mori is that rare individual—the successful female tycoon. Yet she has deftly balanced career with home and family, an accomplishment that has not gone unnoticed here. In a poll of young Japanese working women a couple of years back, Hanae Mori was their overwhelming choice as the ideal career woman.

Born in Shimane Prefecture in 1926, Hanae Mori originally wished to be an artist, but her physician father deemed that an unsuitable profession. Instead she studied Japanese literature at Tokyo Women's Christian College and reconsidered art school after marriage. It was too late to launch an art career, she decided, so she opted for fashion, which was enjoying a surge of postwar popularity. It's a decision she has never regretted. "In fashion you're always moving on to new things," she says, speaking in a lilting, ladylike voice. "You can also put your ideas into concrete forms. I'm constantly interested."

Her timing was also right. Her fashion career coincided with Japan's postwar economic growth, a growth that has helped turn Japan into the burgeoning fashion center it is today.

Dressed in head-to-toe Mori, the designer recently shared some thoughts on Tokyo's rising fashion prominence as well as her business, her background and her signature motif, butterflies.

**Q:** *Your career has neatly paralleled the Japanese fashion industry's rise as an international force in the fashion world. But when you began as a dressmaker in 1951, things were very different. Fashions here in Japan were either made-to-order by dressmakers or cheap, discount-style garments—cheesy \$1 blouses. What made you aware of the potential for a ready-to-wear market as it currently exists, and how did you go about setting up your line of high quality ready-to-wear clothes?*

**MORI:** I became aware of this potential the first time I went to America, which was in 1963. But first I should explain how my own change of work happened. I had been working for some time as a costume designer for Japanese films, and the work left me very tired. I also felt my children were beginning to need me more, and I thought of retiring and giving up the whole thing. Then I went to Paris and spent a couple of months there, thinking things over and trying to decide what to do. Coco Chanel was still alive, and I ordered a suit from her. It took so long to make, and it was so expensive! But I was very impressed by the way the fashion houses in Paris were organized. At that time in Japan you had to do everything yourself, whereas there the designer would design, and someone else would do the cutting, and someone else would do the sewing. That made me stop to think.

After that I thought I'd like to take a look at America and see what the attitude toward the fashion industry was there. So I spent two months in New York, where I was very impressed and stimulated. In New York, for example, if you

went to Saks Fifth Avenue, you saw blacks and whites, fat people and thin, enormous variety, everything. I was impressed by the tremendous openness in New York, which suited my nature very well.

Also, if you needed a dress for that evening, you could walk into Saks and get it. That was a kind of turning point for me; I thought this was something that could work in Japan, and when I returned, I began work on developing these new ideas.

**Q:** *Though 30% of your total sales last year were abroad, your main constituency is still here in Japan. How has the Japanese customer changed in the years you've been a designer?*

**MORI:** Japan has a relatively short history of Western-style fashion, and when I started out, Japanese women still didn't wear Western clothes very much. For formal dress it was always kimono and Western dress was only for working or travel. Women then were very conservative, much more interested in practical ideas than style.

But in the last three or four years especially, the fashion tastes of Japanese women have evolved tremendously. There's a sort of homogeneity to the Japanese. There's the racial purity, the same dark hair and similar appearances. There's also relatively high standard of education, which has affected virtually everyone. So you have the feeling now that there's a very immediate reaction to anything new here, as though you could throw a stone and get a response straight away. It's as though the consumers have grown up all at once.

**Q:** *In a newspaper clipping I found from 1978, you said that a Japanese designer still had to receive recognition abroad in order to be truly appreciated at home. Do you feel this point of view has changed with this change in the consumer?*

**MORI:** The situation has improved a lot, but it hasn't quite passed this stage because there's still the feeling that the Japanese don't have an eye for something that is truly unique. This is one reason artists and designers still go abroad for acclaim and recognition. In Japan young artists and designers still feel critics lack the proper eye to judge. Because we have a short history of Western-style clothes, this field of criticism has not yet matured. In fact I believe the creators and consumers are much more advanced here than the journalists or critics.

**Q:** *A few years back you said you had different collections for your domestic and foreign audiences. Do you still do so, and are there any interesting differences in style preferences in Japan and abroad today?*

**MORI:** We now sell the same collections abroad and in Japan, but there are still some differences in taste. For example, when Westerners want to buy clothes from Japan, they tend to look for Japanese motifs, whereas Japanese women can find that everywhere, so they're more interested in something that has a more Western flavor.

**Q:** *You've mentioned in the past that there were certain periods of fashion you didn't enjoy, such as the unisex look. What do you think of today's styles?*

**MORI:** At the moment it's very easy for me to design, and as a designer I feel very happy because women have reached a new kind of maturity.

**"In Japan, where few women achieve business-world positions of power and influence, Hanae Mori is that rare individual—the successful female tycoon"**

**"If you needed a dress for that evening, you could walk into Saks and get it. I thought this was something that could work in Japan"**





**"Tokyo could eventually become a sort of nucleus for the fashion world"**

**"The established countries such as France and Italy have gone down in quality a bit, so there has been an opening for new blood in the fashion industry"**

There are a lot of women going out to work now, but they've also reached the stage where they want to reconfirm their femininity.

**Q:** How do you deal with the various fashion ideas that prevail each season? How do you approach fashion's new movements?

**MORI:** Well, first of all I am a woman designer, and I think I rely very much on my own feelings about things. For example, I very much like working women, not that there's anything wrong with housewives, but I like the sort of woman who, whatever she's doing, is very vibrant and involved. Lots of women are traveling now and doing active things. As a woman, my creativity relies on my feeling about what is going on, so at the present time I find it very easy for me to work.

**Q:** There seem to be two dominant design currents coming out of Japan at present—round clothes, which follow the contours of a woman's body and are essentially European in origin, and flat clothes, which can be folded like kimono and are typified by fashions by such designers as Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto. You design the former, but much of the attention now given Japanese fashion is focused on the latter. Is the market abroad for Japanese-made "round clothes" suffering as a consequence?

**MORI:** Well, I've been in this business for about 30 years, and I've seen a lot of things. At any time I think you have two currents flowing—one is the more conservative, easy-to-wear style and that's the mainstream. But there's always a kind of counterstream. If you look at Rei

Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, they're doing that kind of thing. As far as Kawakubo's clothes are concerned, she is also a woman designer, and I think she is doing a great job. When I look at her clothes I think she is the next generation. At some stage the ideas these new designers are coming up with will gradually be absorbed into the mainstream. As far as I'm concerned, however, I work in an international scene, and I feel I've graduated from that, although I do have great admiration for designers such as Kawakubo and for what they're doing.

**Q:** Tokyo today is receiving world attention as an emerging fashion center. This is a relatively new situation. Do you think Tokyo will continue to develop this potential?

**MORI:** I think that the Tokyo market has a tremendous future in that, as I said before, the level of consumer has come up so very quickly, and you have a very well-educated population with few class differences—it's really a very even middle-class society, comprised of people who are now very perceptive.

Another thing that may be taken into account is that we have a very well-trained public here, people who are very concerned with such things as finish and quality. In Milan, for example, you find that garment quality is very high, but there are problems with deliveries; goods are often very late. In Japan things are always on time.

In addition we have nearby China, with its enormous producing population, as well as other countries such as Taiwan, Thailand and so on. It's not just Japan itself. There is an area nearby with a tremendous potential for production. Looking at all these factors, I think there is a great deal of future for Tokyo, and that Tokyo could eventually become a sort of nucleus for the fashion world.

**Q:** Japanese is not exactly an international language at this time. Could this slow Tokyo's progress as an international fashion center?

**MORI:** Well, Japanese is difficult, but I don't think language has anything to do with the fashion industry. When you look at the world today, you find we are living in a kind of global situation where any event that occurs is immediately transmitted everywhere. I think the job of the fashion designer is to pick up the feeling of what's happening, the feeling of the age, and to convey this in his or her work. In a sense that is the language of fashion.

**Q:** There's been so much international attention lavished on Japanese fashion recently. Do you think this will cause interest to burn out as quickly as it started up? Does this increase the risk that in a year or two no-one will be interested in Japanese fashion anymore? Is there a chance Tokyo Style will wither in the public estimate when flashy new designers start popping up in Hong Kong or other new places?

**MORI:** There really seems to have been too much fuss about Japan too quickly. There's not enough depth to the Japanese fashion world yet—it's as if you can walk in the front door and straight out the back. The established countries such as France and Italy have gone down in quality a bit, so there has been an opening for new blood in the fashion industry. But we in Japan still need a bit more time to develop. After all, it's only



been over the last five years that Japan has established itself as a fashion center.

As far as switching to Hong Kong or South Korea or any other new place that comes along, there is still lots that's new that's going to come out of Japan. There's an entire generation of bright young designers in college now, for example. I often judge fashion contests, and the young talent is very abundant.

**Q: Why Japan? Why has this country produced so many original and influential fashion designers in such a brief period?**

**MORI:** First of all, the education level and the standard of living have both come up so quickly. But designers here also have a tremendous depth of Japanese history and tradition behind them. Even though they may be studying in the Western mold, they have this depth of Japanese tradition to draw on that goes back more than 1,000 years; it's a kind of nourishment.

**Q: Why do you think so many turned to fashion design instead of, say, interior design?**

**MORI:** Well, space is so limited here in Japan for one thing. Fashion is something that can be enjoyed by anyone.

**Q: You are a special adviser to the newly established "Fashion Promotion Foundation," which is designed to introduce Japanese fashion abroad and promote the development of Japanese fashion. What do you think this new organization can achieve?**

**MORI:** I'm very happy that this has been created and I hope it will be the basis for bringing up new Japanese designers. As I said earlier, the Japanese design world does not yet have enough depth, and this is a good way to encourage growth. It seems a good way of giving these designers proper backing and of promoting an exchange with foreign designers. I think it will contribute to making Tokyo a true fashion center.

**Q: French haute couture is a costly and, according to some observers, outdated venture. Why did you decide to involve yourself in this difficult and expensive field?**

**MORI:** I think it's the same kind of thing I referred to earlier about young designers needing to go overseas to gain proper recognition. I think there's something very special about Paris, and being a part of *haute couture* shows that the work you've done has reached a certain level.

**Q: As a Japanese woman, was it difficult to gain acceptance in France's tight fashion circles?**

**MORI:** It wasn't as hard as I expected. I suspect they were waiting for some new blood. You see, the French are very conservative, and fashion at that time had reached a bottleneck. If you look at other areas, such as art, over the years, you'll notice that the French seem to look for new blood from outside when they reach a bottleneck. So it was a good time, a stage when *prêt-à-porter* (ready-to-wear) was beginning to put a lot of pressure on French *haute couture*.

**Q: But do you think haute couture really has a place in today's fashion world?**

**MORI:** I'm a person who believes that *haute couture* will never die out. You could describe it as a very high quality form of art. If everyone were working only in *prêt-à-porter*, everyone would be thinking only about money and business. You

need to have this very high level of quality and production for fashion's own healthy growth and development.

**Q: But isn't it true that designers do not make a profit from haute couture and only hope to break even?**

**MORI:** Even in Paris people make all their money in *prêt-à-porter*. But I do have a lot of *haute couture* customers, especially Americans. If you're working in *haute couture* in Paris, you know immediately which country has the best economic situation.

**Q: In the past you've said you had difficulties from the EEC when you brought Japanese-made fashions into France. Is this still a problem?**

**MORI:** The situation certainly hasn't improved. But I think it's natural if you consider that the French fashion industry is very proud and that the country's economy is not going too well at the moment. So if you have very popular products coming in from outside, you naturally want to protect the industry. As a matter of common sense I try to produce in Europe or Paris the clothes that we will sell there.

**Q: You have factories in America, too. Does that blunt any similar problems you might have there?**

**MORI:** In the very beginning when our exports grew tremendously, it became a problem, but since then we've been making as much there as we can. The problem is that you can't find very good fabrics in America, so we tend to import these from Japan or Europe. Also the standard of workmanship is not really good enough for very high quality clothes, but it's fine for the middle range.

**Q: In 1978 you told an interviewer that Japan still could not compete with Paris and Europe in matters of good quality. Has that changed?**

**MORI:** The level has come up here very much. But as far as the absolute top range is concerned, we still can't compete.

**Q: Your signature is the butterfly, which flits about many of your designs, fashions as well as accessories. Why butterflies?**

**MORI:** Well, when I was growing up in Shimane Prefecture, butterflies were a part of my existence; the flocks were so fleeting and beautiful. Later when I started designing, I noticed that Americans knew very little of Japan, although we knew much about America. Americans thought Japan was just geisha and Mount Fuji, that type of thing. The image of women was also very poor, usually that of pathetic creatures oppressed by Japanese men or abandoned by foreign men as in the case of *Madame Butterfly*. I made up my mind that at some stage when I moved into the U.S. market, I would try to create a new image of Japanese women. There may still be the element of pathos to women here, but I wanted the image to be one of strength and vibrance, like the butterfly. ●

*Terry Trucco is an American free-lance writer who has been residing in Tokyo since 1981. A fashion specialist, she has written for various American newspapers and magazines including the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, the Asian Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor.*

**"As a matter of common sense I try to produce in Europe or Paris the clothes that we will sell there"**