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## The Disruptive Force of the Big Three of Japanese Fashion and Why They Had to Emerge from Tokyo

“Style is a simple way of saying complicated things” - Jean Cocteau, French writer, designer, playwright, artist, and filmmaker.

Tokyo is revered as one of the most significant cities in the world of fashion, particularly in streetwear. However, unlike New York, Milan, or Paris, it has a largely homogenous population and entered the global fashion spotlight much later. Therefore, it is worth looking into how Japanese fashion has become so prominent worldwide and the societal, political, and cultural influences that have led to the export of innovative designers, such as Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto. This paper first serves as an introduction to the life, work, and impact of these three trailblazing designers during their early careers. Although the influence of these Japanese designers on global fashion has been documented and preserved through texts and museum exhibits, there is a lack of literature elucidating why they all emerged out of Tokyo onto the international fashion scene during the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore the latter half of the paper will explore why their work had to be birthed in Japan’s capital city. By incorporating the kimono and the history of waxing and waning tides of attire restrictions in Japan, I will attempt to disseminate how attention to craftsmanship and sentiments of rebellion have contributed to Tokyo’s renowned fashion pioneers.

### **1. An Introduction to the Big Three: Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto**

Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto are often referred to as “The Big Three” of the Japanese design world, whose works blurs the confines between fashion and art. Beginning in the 1980s, the three Japanese designers unintentionally created and introduced the

international fashion arena to the Japanese avant-garde fashion school that starkly contradicted Western design and featured asymmetric, loose-fitting outfits.<sup>1</sup> Avant-garde fashion is difficult to characterize succinctly because it consists of artists committed to iconoclastic values that oppose contemporary conventions and dominant social values that evolve over time. American sociologist Diane Crane, claims that an art movement can be considered avant-garde if it redefines artistic convention, utilizes new techniques or tools, or redefines the nature of what can be considered artworks.<sup>2</sup> The collective creations of Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto, apply to all of these postulations; they reimaged clothes-making conventions, introduced novel fabrics, and redefined fashion as a form of art. However, their challenges to established norms were prevalent not only in their work, but also in their life; they rejected being confined by traditions, geography, and customs of Japanese and Western societies and the fashion industry.

Chronologically, during the early 1970s, Kenzo Takeda became the first Japanese designer to be recognized by French fashion professionals for his ready-to-wear clothes that included reconstructing European clothing with his Japanese-influenced patterns and quilting. Although he paved the way for Japanese designers in Paris, the opposition to Western conventions came from the avant-garde designers.<sup>3</sup> In 1973, Miyake debuted in Paris as part of a joint ready-to-wear exhibition the same year French ready-to-wear was institutionalized for the first time as prêt-à-porter. Kawakubo and Yamamoto held a modest joint Paris debut in the Intercontinental Hotel in 1981. The initial French response was largely critical and apprehensive of Japanese designers in the Western-centric industry. Critics referred to their baggy, asymmetric looks as “The Day After” and “Post Hiroshima.”<sup>4</sup> However, throughout the decade they undoubtedly redefined clothing. Notably, they presented minimalistic, loose-fitting garments that

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<sup>1</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, “The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion,” *Fashion Theory* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 195–223, <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270404778051771>.

<sup>2</sup> Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde the New York Art World, 1940-1985* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Kawamura, “The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion.”

<sup>4</sup> Bonnie English, *Japanese Fashion Designers: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo* (Berg, 2011).

appeared more androgynous during a period in fashion where Western female clothing was being designed snugly to the body to expose contours. Furthermore, although they never intended to advertise their clothing as distinctly Japanese, their origins are reflected in their clothing fit, materials, and appearance.

The first of the trio to debut in Paris, Issey Miyake, was born in Hiroshima in 1939 and majored in art design at Tama Art University in Toyko. He followed his school acquaintance, Kenzo, to Paris where he studied under French designer Guy Laroche and the Givenchy house. His first small collection was featured in New York's Bloomingdale's and included T-shirts dyed with Japanese tattoo designs and sashiko-embroidered jackets. Sashiko is a Japanese sewing technique that gives strength to the fabrics used in work clothing.<sup>5</sup> He is occasionally referred to as 'The Picasso of Fashion' for the diversity of his work, his discovery of new creative methodologies, and his challenging of traditional design concepts<sup>6</sup>. Miyake was the first to redefine sartorial fashion conventions by introducing novel patterns and fit, laying the foundation for avant-garde fashion in Paris. In stark opposition to Western female clothing that fit tightly to the body, he introduced large, loose-fitting garments with no traditional construction and minimal detail (Fig. 1). Miyake's work emphasized wearable art that liberated the wearer because it fit to their body, rather than forcing the wearer to mold into the clothes, which were largely hypersexualized for Western female clothing.

Miyake was also recognizable for his many original fabrics, which he worked closely on with his textile director. His most commercially successful collection, *Pleats Please* (1993), utilized a novel method of preparing pleats. Historically, pleats were permanently pressed before a garment is cut, but he reversed this order. He first cut a garment two-and-a-half to three times its proper size, folded, ironed, and oversewed the material so that the straight lines remained in

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<sup>5</sup> Yuniya Kawamura, "Issey Miyake," LoveToKnow, accessed May 16, 2022, <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/fashion-clothing-industry/fashion-designers/issey-miyake>.

<sup>6</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

place (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> Other Miyake innovations include novel garment sewing techniques, such as heat taping and cutting by ultrasound, which he introduced at the Making Things exhibition at the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 1999<sup>8</sup>.

Continuing his exploration of fitting cloth to the body with a heightened awareness of sustainability, Miyake debuted *A Piece Of Cloth (APOP)* in 1999, which featured single tube-like fabrics that can cover the entire body. The idea stemmed from his belief that “people are waiting for something that is fun which they feel that we can create together” and provided consumers the freedom to cut the cloth in various ways for their own needs<sup>9</sup>. According to Suzanne Lee, a research fellow at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Miyake’s *APOP* proposed a radical rethink of fashion manufacturing for the twenty-first century because it prioritized collaboration with the customers and sustainability.<sup>10</sup> Miyake’s *Pleats Please* and *APOP* redefined the role of design in everyday life with a revolutionary emphasis on technology and sustainability before it became mainstream<sup>11</sup>.

Rei Kawakubo was born in Tokyo in 1942 and founded the Comme des Garcons label in 1969. She took an unconventional route into fashion, studying literature and aesthetic philosophy at Keio University before working in the advertisement department of a textile manufacturer. Kawakubo grew up during the postwar period when American leftist ideas regarding women’s rights became politically and socially relevant, and her mother left her father when he refused to let her work outside the home.<sup>12</sup> Her creative freedom at the company allowed her to create her own garments and led her to pursue freelance designing. By the 1970s, Kawakubo had built domestic success with her debut Tokyo show in 1975 and 150 domestic stores earning 30 million

<sup>7</sup> Issei Miyake et al., *Issey Miyake Making Things* (Paris; Zurich; New York: Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain ; Scalo, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Kawamura, “Issey Miyake”; Miyake et al., *Issey Miyake Making Things*.

<sup>9</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Lee, *Fashioning the Future: Tomorrow’s Wardrobe* (Thames & Hudson, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>12</sup> English.

USD annually.<sup>13</sup> She started designing to create clothing for independent women that prioritized comfort over body shape and attractiveness to the opposite sex.

Kawakubo and Yamamoto are often placed next to each other for their similar avant-garde fashion that disregards Western fashion's sexualization and emphasizes black outfits with intentional imperfections (holes, tears, and uneven hemlines). In 1981 and 82, Kawakubo shocked the audience with her black color palette, imperfections, and loose fit (Fig. 4). Similar to Miyake, Kawakubo worked closely with fabrics in her design process. She utilized computer programs to generate random imperfections in her items that distinguished her work, stating, "I like it when something is not perfect. Hand-weaving is the best way to achieve this, but since this isn't always possible, we loosen a screw on the machines here and there so they can't do exactly as they are supposed to."<sup>14</sup> Further, during her garment design process, she often began with deconstruction, such as removing lapels, disregarding the piece's intended function. She then reconstructs, often making multipurpose garments with different proportions, such as rethinking the shoulder-waist relationship in her *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* collection (Fig. 5). Although her tendency to deviate from natural body proportions differed from Miyake's fits, her uncopiable designs also challenged preconceived notions of construction and gained the admiration of other designers.<sup>15</sup>

According to many fashion critics, Kawakubo is credited for reinventing black as the color of decisive refusal, and this achievement was cited by the Harvard school of design when she was awarded the Excellence in Design Award in 2000.<sup>16</sup> Kawakubo's distortion of body proportions and the concept of the female form is heralded as a significant innovative disruption to the Western-centric fashion world's emphasis on the female form. Louis Vuitton's Marc Jacobs argues that "everyone is influenced by Comme des Garcons", and her paramount

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<sup>13</sup> English.

<sup>14</sup> Deyan Sudjic, *Rei Kawakubo and Comme Des Garcons* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>16</sup> English.

influence on the fashion industry is been widely recognized by contemporary designers, including Alexander McQueen, Anne Demeulemeester, Helmut Lang, Martin Margiela, and Jil Sander.<sup>17</sup>

In many ways, Yohji Yamamoto shared a similar design vision, heritage, and philosophy as Kawakubo. Born in Tokyo one year after Kawakubo, Yamamoto was raised by a hardworking single mother who worked in dressmaking because his father died during the war in Manchuria. After attaining a law degree from Keio University, he studied at *Bunka Fukuso Gakuin*, a fashion institute in Tokyo. Like Kawakubo, he marketed his clothes in Japan during the 70s before setting his ambitions on Paris.<sup>18</sup> His early shows featured anti-glamorous, asexual, and rugged garments that symbolized destitution and hardship, contradicting the elitist industry's visual sumptuousness (Fig. 6). In response to their debut show, Carla Sozzani, the proprietor of the globally-influential 10 Corso Como clothing store in Milan, remarked, "For me it was an emotional shock when I first saw Yohji and Comme des Garcons . . . at that moment, everything was all Mugler and Montana, kind of big shoulders and a lot of makeup, but always incredibly feminine, always revealing a part of the body by leaving it uncovered."<sup>19</sup> Like Miyake, the two acknowledged that their Japanese origins influenced their work but preferred to be considered designers who happened to be born in Japan, rather than Japanese designers.<sup>20</sup>

Like Kawakubo, Yamamoto used blacks as his primary colors for his male and female garments. The influence of these two designers in reinvigorating black in fashion cannot be understated. In Japan, the act of dressing in these Yamamoto and Kawakubo inspired black silhouettes became so popular that devout followers of this aesthetic have been dubbed カラス族 (crow tribe). According to Akiko Fukai, curator of the Kyoto Costume Institute, the international

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<sup>17</sup> Sudjic, *Rei Kawakubo and Comme Des Garcons*

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Mears, "Yohji Yamamoto," LoveToKnow, accessed May 16, 2022, <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/fashion-clothing-industry/fashion-designers/yohji-yamamoto>.

<sup>19</sup> Guy Trebay, "Mr. Yamamoto's Blue Period," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2005, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/13/magazine/mr-yamamotos-blue-period.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Mears, "Yohji Yamamoto."

trend, which began in the 1980s, for young women to wear long black street dresses, flat black boots, and unevenly cut hair was a direct result of the impact of Yamamoto and Kawakubo<sup>21</sup>. Yamamoto is also responsible for introducing new proportions and a deconstructed appearance to the classic Western suit. He, like Kawakubo, utilized deconstruction of the garment to create these new suits, which began with the elimination of the shoulder pad. By removing these, he directly defied convention because broad shoulders were viewed as the litmus test for the male physique. Yamamoto attempted to create suits that catered to the wearer's comfort by rounding the shoulders, creating larger armholes, and lengthening lapels. Yamamoto and Kawakubo undoubtedly birthed deconstructionism in fashion; Claire Wilcox, fashion curator at the V&A, says, "they had a huge impact, creating a disruption of construction."<sup>22</sup> On top of creating redefined menswear, Yamamoto often questioned gender identity and has a fondness for women in menswear.<sup>23</sup> This questioning is apparent in his use of female models at his shows in his menswear collections and female-oriented attire that draws from traditional menswear (Fig. 6). By swimming against the tide to question gender roles in fashion, they popularized postmodern, androgynous styles that inspired designers in Europe, such as Martin Margiela and John Galliano, to follow suit.

It would be impossible to highlight all of the revolutionary contributions that these three designers have had in this paper. Still, the prior sections intended to be an introduction to their impact. All three started design in Tokyo but recognized the need to present their work in Paris to be internationally recognized. The Big Three's influence in the 1980s onward has had an enormous impact on global fashion, as indicated by the success of their brands and influence on other designers, and established Japanese craftsmanship's role internationally.<sup>24</sup> In an industry

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<sup>21</sup> Kawamura, "The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion."

<sup>22</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>23</sup> English.

<sup>24</sup> Authors: Elyssa da Cruz, "Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto: Japanese Fashion in the Twentieth Century | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed May 16, 2022, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jafa/hd\\_jafa.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jafa/hd_jafa.htm).

that European cities and designers had historically dominated, it is curious that these three designers began their prominence in Paris at the same time. The next part of this paper will explore Tokyo's unique influences on the inception of their groundbreaking garments.

## **2.1 How They Came to Be: Historical Context**

First, it is essential to understand the historical context of clothing in Tokyo. Simultaneously, their fashion is often left open to interpretation, so it is difficult to pinpoint direct reasons for how their origin influenced their work. As is the case with many art forms, their work is undeniably influenced by the history they lived and learned. Therefore, the formulation of hypotheses for how Japan birthed The Big Three must begin with the societal and cultural context of Tokyo.

Tokyo's history of oscillating fashion restrictions patently influenced the rebellious trends of fashion in Tokyo and this past is reflected in The Big Three's work. During the Edo Period, the Tokugawa military forbade commoners to wear silk, but rebellion against the government's policing of physiological space was evident once merchants became wealthier and started lining their standard cotton robes with silk.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, by the late 17th century when the samurai role shifted from military to bureaucratic duties, they replaced their lavish, ceremonial kimonos with more sober everyday attire. They adopted self-discipline-symbolizing black clothing, and good taste was expressed through intelligent design and subtle stylistic differences.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, although restrictions on sumptuous clothing are historically common in cities, the Japanese adapted by wearing restrained, refined clothing. Although the understated elegance of Japanese fashion was not fully appreciated until the late 20th century, the aphorism from the artistically indispensable Edo Period is evidently adopted by Kawakubo and Yamamoto.

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<sup>25</sup> W. David Marx, *Ametora: How Japan Saved American Style* (Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

Later, during the Meiji Period, the Japanese government—desperate to show the West that it was a developed nation worthy of ending the Unequal Treaties—implemented Western dress styles to navy, police, and bureaucrat uniforms. In 1855, Tokyo's Imperial University dressed pupils in *gakuran* (closed square-collar jackets and pants), which has persisted as the classic male student uniform.<sup>27</sup> The government understood and attempted to utilize the political power of clothing, and instituted homogenizing uniforms that created a brewing tension between norms and self-expression. In fact, records indicate that as early as the 1920s, girls would alter skirt length and style to their taste on days without uniform inspection.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, although the problem of finding self-expression in a homogenous group has been worked on for decades by Tokyoites, The Big Three were likely influenced by this challenge and showcased their solutions to the global fashion scene through their individualistic and unique clothing that contrasted the conventional, glamorous works of Western designers.

After the Kanto Earthquake, retail spaces became more physically and culturally accessible, creating a consumer market for the affluent to sport Western attire creating the *mobo-moga* trend, which was most prolific in the Ginza. The *moga* were associated with increased, albeit limited, job opportunities for women in Tokyo. For conservatives, these independent and flashy women represented a threat to the political order because they became associated with leftist social dogma and challenges to stereotypical gender roles.<sup>29</sup> Thus, although the look was endorsed by department stores, conservative magazines depicted them as a danger to society (Fig. 7).<sup>30</sup> At the same time, some women incorporated men's European looks, such as long trousers and men's jackets, challenging the gendered aesthetics of Western clothing. Interestingly, they were called *Garuson* (*Garcon*-French for boy), often as an insult implying

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<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Ametora*.

<sup>28</sup> Tomoko Namba, "School Uniform Reforms in Modern Japan," in *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia* (Springer International Publishing, 2018)

<sup>29</sup> Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Teasley, "(Anti)-Hysteric Glamour: Masquerade, Cross-Dressing, and the Construction of Identity in Japanese Fashion Magazines," *Critical Matrix* 9, no. 1 (1995): 45.

their lack of femininity. Therefore, although Comme des Garcons has claimed Francoise Hardy's song, "Tous les garçons et les filles," to be the inspiration for the brand's name<sup>31</sup>, the resemblance between the 1920s trend and the brand's early creative vision is evident.

However, these freedoms of expression were short-lived because the militaristic government of the 1930s—worried about leftist radicalization—swept Ginza's streets of overly fashionable youth.<sup>32</sup> During WWII, the government produced propaganda against the West, banned English labeling of brands, and enforced *kokuminfuku* (civil attire made of military uniform fabrics) for men and women mostly more *monpe* (loose trousers that could easily be repaired with household materials).<sup>33</sup> Although the end of the war led to the end of stringent national clothing restrictions, the cycling precedent that political influences establish clothing rules, and that these rules have been broken was set. This rebellious nature to the status quo of clothing is apparent in The Big Three's objection to Western proportions and display.

The era most directly influential in these Japanese designers' works is likely the postwar era of their formative years. Due to the dire food crisis and the US blocking the commercial import of textiles to Japan, few could attain or make new clothing. The people of the war-devastated Tokyo resorted to sourcing fresh clothing from black market sales of American charity drives. At the same time, American G.I.'s and their wives flaunted material wealth coming out of the Ginza military PX, giving a veneer of prestige to American goods and practices. Historian John Dower states, "in the years of acute hunger and scarcity, the material comfort of the Americans was simply staggering to behold." This disparity in the early years of occupation led many Japanese to view the American lifestyle as an escape from the despair of

<sup>31</sup> Highsnobiety, "How Comme Des Garcons Got Its Name," Highsnobiety, September 22, 2015, <https://www.hightsnobiety.com/p/how-comme-des-garcons-got-its-name/>.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Ametora*.

<sup>33</sup> Masahito Inoue, "Kokumin-Fuku, the National Uniform for the Universal Body in Space without a Partition," *Dressstudy* 63 (2013): 8.

the *kurai tanima* (the dark valley).<sup>34</sup> However, even with the economic rebound brought on by the Korean War and the desire to abandon wartime rags for American clothing, many were unable to. The Japanese government was solely focused on exporting textiles and instituted protectionist regulations blocking the import of foreign clothing, forcing many women to make *koseifuku* (reborn clothing), American-style clothing made from old kimono fabrics. Even after the government lifted imported textile restrictions, many individuals continued to rely on neighborhood tailors to stitch wardrobes together. There are undeniable parallels between this era of self-made clothing from reused fabrics and Miyake's dedication to making his customers collaborators in *APOC*. The period's influence on Kawakubo and Yamamoto's deconstructive styles is also apparent because they both require reinventing an old garment for new fits. Therefore, although "Hiroshima chic" is often interpreted as depicting war devastation or an appreciation of imperfection,<sup>35</sup> it may also be a product of the patchwork-like clothing construction of the postwar era.

Socially, the US occupation introduced leftist ideologies that granted women greater freedoms politically and socially. Despite the abolishment of patriarchal family structures and the introduction of women's suffrage, men were disproportionately involved in the economic growth and decision-making processes, leading to the 1970s feminist movement that emphasized significant changes to social institutions rather than aiming to change women's consciousness of themselves as women.<sup>36</sup> These demands for equal employment opportunity and gender education were familiar to Kawakubo because she was a student and her father was a professor at Keio. Therefore, these designers' upbringing during the Japanese women's rights movement indubitably influenced their revolutionary female garment silhouettes that rejected the sexualized fits of Western designers. For example, although Kawakubo refuted claims that she is a feminist

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<sup>34</sup> Marx, *Ametora*.

<sup>35</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>36</sup> Machiko Matsui, "Evolution of the Feminist Movement in Japan," *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 3 (1990): 435–49.

designer, she has expressed her rebellion against societal gender norms: “when I was young, it was unusual for a female university graduate to do the same job as a man. And of course women didn’t earn the same. I rebelled against that. I never lose my ability to rebel, I get angry and that anger becomes my energy for certain.”<sup>37</sup> The simultaneous feminist movement and “mainstreamification” of Western attire for women after the war influenced these designers to create comfortable, loose-fitting clothing that catered not to the male gaze but to making the wearer feel comfortable and independently powerful. The concurrent institution of American ideologies and acceptance of Western clothing during the Japanese feminist movement differed from that of other nations. The need for clothing to fit this movement predisposed Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto to create gender-questioning garments.

## 2.2 How They Came to Be: The Kimono

The kimono remains a vital indicator of Japanese culture and connection to the past. Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto have all commented that this garment of national pride plays a role as the foundation for conceptualizing their garments’ space, balance, and interaction with the body. Although the kimono was introduced to Japan from China during the Yamato period, the cultural development during the Edo period established the persisting form of the garment.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, because Tokyo was the established center of education during their early life, their understanding of the kimono was likely best developed in the capital. Some regard the kimono as essential to not only the Big Three’s works but also in implying that fashion is not explicitly Western<sup>39</sup>, providing the Japanese assurance that they can attempt fashion. In terms of construction, the kimono is efficient and simple, consisting of a single bolt of cloth that has changed little throughout history. This simplicity is reflected in the Big Three’s work, most

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<sup>37</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>38</sup> Penelope Francks, “Was Fashion a European Invention?: The Kimono and Economic Development in Japan,” *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 3 (June 1, 2015): 331–61, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14223685749368>.

<sup>39</sup> Francks.

notably in Miyake's *APOC*, which incorporates the aesthetics of garment flexibility and personalization.

Furthermore, the essence of the kimono, which translates to "thing to wear," has inspired these Japanese designers' utilization of space and layering of the body. Their early garments that freely flowed with the body are directly influenced by the kimono fit. Miyake stated that he "learned about the space between the body and the fabric from the traditional kimono."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Kawakubo and Yamamoto incorporated the kimono's modest skin exposure into their concealing designs. Kawakubo's most prominent example of concealment is her *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* collection where she utilized extra fabric in unconventional areas of the female body to create unpredictable silhouettes that blurred the lines between the body and fabric (Fig. 5). Yamamoto opted to draw on the geometric structure of the kimono to create his trenchcoats in the 1990s, saying that he appreciated the power hiding the figure affords the wearer (Fig. 7).<sup>41</sup> All three designers utilize their awareness of the traditional garment and its modesty but diverge from strict adherence to its original form to create contemporary works that challenged traditional women's collections. Therefore, it is impossible to imagine Miyake, Kawakubo, or Yamamoto's works without the kimono.

Although I began this project cognizant of the Big Three's contributions to global fashion, through extensive readings, I found that their revolutionary impact cannot be overstated. Furthermore, I was disappointed to find few scholars exploring the fundamental question of why they simultaneously burst into Paris's gatekept industry, so I sought to draw on historical and cultural contexts that I postulate may explain why these Japanese designers' produced defining avant-garde garments in the 1980s. Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto were fundamental in redefining clothing's relationship to the architecture of the human body and spurred aesthetic

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<sup>40</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>41</sup> English.

choices that remain influential in contemporary fashion. Their introduction of creative and unique art incorporating loose, deconstructed, monotone aesthetics defied the established norms of sexuality and desirability in fashion. Their avant-garde art and lives can be better understood against the historical backdrop of attire policing and clothing as a political rebellion against the status quo in Tokyo. Furthermore, the economic and social environment of postwar Tokyo during their upbringing is undeniably intertwined with their designs. Lastly, the persevering garment and cultural icon of Japanese culture, the kimono, inextricably influenced their designs theoretically and physically. Ultimately, because fashion is a means of self-expression and inseparable from its political undertones, it provides an important lens into the lived experience of people in history. Therefore, future work should be done to expand on these hypotheses by incorporating common streetwear of the time. This essay focused on the final products of these designers, but another interesting direction someone with greater analytical skill in runway fashion could take would be to connect these theories to the shows and garment presentations.



Fig. 1. Issey Miyake, *Seashell*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985.<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 2. Issey Miyake, *Ensemble*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Issey Miyake, *Seashell*, 1985, Clothing, 1985, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/87969>

<sup>43</sup> Issey Miyake, *Ensemble*, 1994, Clothing, 1994, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/762098>.



Fig 3. Issey Miyake, *APOC* display, Radical Fashion exhibition, V & A Museum, London, October 2001.<sup>44</sup>



Fig. 4. Rei Kawakubo, *Holes Collection*, Takamasa Takahashi Collection, 1982. <sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> English, *Japanese Fashion Designers*.

<sup>45</sup> Rei Kawakubo, *Holes Collection*, 1982, 1982,  
<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/collecting-commes/rei-kawakubo-reframing-fashion/>.



Fig. 5. Rei Kawakubo, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* Collection, 1997.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 6. Yohji Yamamoto, Spring 1999 Ready-to-wear, 1997.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Condé Nast, “Comme Des Garçons Spring 1997 Ready-to-Wear Collection,” Vogue, August 3, 1996, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>.

<sup>47</sup> Condé Nast, “Yohji Yamamoto Spring 1999 Ready-to-Wear Collection,” Vogue, October 1, 1998, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1999-ready-to-wear/yohji-yamamoto>.



Fig. 7. "Changing Ginza." *Tokyo Puck*, January 1929.<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 8. Yohji Yamamoto, *Kimono Sleeve Coat*, 1995.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> “‘Changing Ginza’,” Tokyo Puck, January 1929,” accessed May 24, 2022, <https://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist372/Text/ps4-10.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Yohji Yamamoto, “Yohji Yamamoto 1995 Kimono Coat,” 1stDibs.com, 1995, [https://www.1stdibs.com/fashion/clothing/coats-outerwear/yohji-yamamoto-1995-kimono-coat/id-v\\_10215522/](https://www.1stdibs.com/fashion/clothing/coats-outerwear/yohji-yamamoto-1995-kimono-coat/id-v_10215522/).