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JAPAN – UNREST OR THE ART OF SILENCE? THE INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS ON CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

Case study

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the influence of aesthetics developed by the Japanese on fashion and design in Asia, and more specifically in Japan. Do creative anxieties find visualization in designs, or does the art of silence, philosophy and aesthetics, which have been honed over generations, give an impulse to act? The analysis of the assumptions and concepts in this field allowed for the selection of the most important concepts – according to the author – that determine the creations of Japanese artists. Every aspect of Japanese life is designed to create an aesthetic effect.

The text discusses such terms characteristic of Japanese aesthetics as *shibui*, *wabi sabi*, and *iki*. Getting to know these features allows for a deeper understanding of the meaning of activities and philosophy of designers, their approach to beauty, life, and death. The author describes the Japanese delight over the fragility and elusiveness, imperfection and understatement. Understanding these basic concepts gives you knowledge that allows you to understand the philosophy of design creators following the example of the works of Naoto Fukasawa, Nendo design studio or the MUJI brand. The profiles of fashion designers who contributed to the development of this area were also discussed: Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake, Yoshija Yamamoto. Getting acquainted with the issues presented in the text allows better and deeper understanding of the philosophy of the works of Japanese designers.

Keywords

Japan, Japanese aesthetics, fashion, design

Introduction

Every aspect of Japanese life – food, clothing, painting, architecture – is geared towards creating an aesthetic effect. It is not surprising, then, that the Japanese have created many aesthetic terms,” wrote Ching Yu Chang in the essay entitled “The General Concept of Beauty”¹.

For Europeans, Japan is a remote country located on the Asian continent. Separated from the mainland by the ocean and located on numerous islands with beautiful names and landscapes. The Japanese name for the country is Nihon or Nippon, and the spelling of this name in Japanese calligraphy looks like this: 日本. Two signs. It is an island country; on a map of the world it looks like a narrow strip located between Asia and America, although it is closer to Asia. Japan has four major islands (Hokkaido, Honshu, Sikoku, Kyushu) and many tiny islets, such as the beautiful Oki-no-Tori-shima, whose name can simply be translated as “the Island of Birds of the Open Sea”. This isolation has contributed to the development of its original culture and aesthetics, in the widest sense of its meaning.

Thinking about Japan is a state of mind, so different from the European perception of the external and internal world. Japan either delights, fascinates or arouses great amazement, like the unusual peculiarities found in the modern world. It is the “Land of the Rising Sun”: this is the symbolism of the Japanese flag, the red circle symbolizing the sun on the white background.

Japan has long been a closed and inaccessible country uninterested in the Western world. It was governed by its own laws and rules very much different from those that hold sway in the European cultural and geographic area. Japan has developed its own aesthetics, so different from the European one, with different foundations and different elaborations. Belonging to a single human species does not mean that people understand and speak a similar language of aesthetics. They try to establish a dialogue to get to know one another but societies so mentally different can only concur on a few points. They differ in religion, cultural roots, the concept of life and death, art, theater, literature, complexion and eye contour. There are many more examples.

Japan elicits delight or anxiety. Anxiety, because Europeans will not understand Japanese culture or the Japanese philosophy of life or perception of beauty and nature. They often delight only in the initial, superficial, impression or view. People fascinated by this country consider everything so beautiful that you do not need to set the camera lens because you will always grasp something beautiful. But most people don't even try to explore the basics of Japanese philosophy and aesthetics.

The fact that Japan has long been so closed and inaccessible and has its own age-old established customs and traditions has been perfectly captured in several films. The American perception of Japanese traditions, such as the concept of honour shown in the “The Last Samurai” (Edward Zwick, 2003), can arouse different feelings. But it is an attempt to show, in a graspable way, the differences in

1 *Estetyka japońska. Antologia*, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 2001, p. 9.

our understanding of the world and in behaviours. In the film, the main character, a Civil War veteran played by Tom Cruise, learns new rules, honour and other aesthetics of life. The most outstanding Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998), showed Japan's unique character as well as his own understanding of Western culture by producing film like "Throne of Blood", the adaptation of William Shakespeare's "Macbeth".

It is a country located on a highly active tectonic plate. As a result, Japanese live on the verge of life and death; they experience danger every day. The nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, when the "black rain" fell from the sky, had a huge impact on their perception of the world. Volcanic eruptions and tsunami waves have forced them to adapt to the forces of nature. Seismic tremors are as natural there as the attacks of winter in Europe but the Japanese have learned to live with this: they have specially constructed buildings and training in the event of an earthquake. They know how to act, they are disciplined and, knowing the rules, they follow official recommendations. Living in eternal danger changes their approach to, and the understanding of, the world, life and death. They like to take risks, by ordering food such as the infamous fugu fish, for instance. If improperly treated, this fish can cause fatal poisoning and a dozen people or so die every year because of it. But the meal is an Asian rarity. Balancing on the edge of life and death. Is it fear or the art of silence – Zen?

Beauty and Aesthetics

Beauty permeates many areas of life. The concept of the aesthetics of life and the beauty of dying is one of the values of Japanese culture. This philosophy is perfectly combined with the concept of impermanence, which is an indispensable component of beauty. The Japanese know how to express sorrow over the fragility of beauty and love. Even life is marked by fragility, fleeting and impermanence. This is why the Japanese celebrate the time of the cherry blossom: this delicate flower stays on the trees for a very short time.

The Japanese have created many terms to describe their aesthetics, such as *yugen* (mystery, depth), *miyabi* (elegance), *wabi* and *sabi* (simplicity, coarseness, ephemerality) and *iki* (all the best aesthetic tradition based on the concepts of simplicity, lightness, transience, suggestion and understatement)².

They also apply to Japanese literature and theatre. To understand the aesthetics of the object, further terms are important. One of the most important is *shibui*, which is difficult to translate:

It is not strong or obvious, it is not refined or correct, it is not complicated or exaggerated, nor is it ostentatious". *Shibui* combines the seriousness of tranquillity, understatement and the total integrity of craftsmanship, material and pattern [...] contains the value of tranquillity. Tranquillity can be achieved through incompleteness, or rather a state of unaccomplishedness or an unfinished pattern where there is still room for imagination³.

2 *Estetyka japońska. Piękno życia i śmierci*, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 2001.

3 *Estetyka japońska. Antologia*, p. 62.

This concept seems to partly explain the interest of designers and artists in imperfection and irregularity, understatement and incompleteness. Transience also joins these concepts, even in relation to the perception of objects, viewing them at different times and environments. Beauty is a dialogue with nature, admiration for the transience of weather phenomena, seasons, the flowering of plants.

Mono-no-aware is one of the aesthetic concepts. It defines the emotional state surrounding various areas of life, imbued with sadness and melancholy which arise in contact with the inevitably transient beauty of the external world. It is a kind of reflection. It is in such a philosophy or approach to people and objects, that the essence of kintsugi – literally meaning “to repair with gold” or “golden scars” – lies. It is a technique of repairing broken ceramics by combining broken elements with a mixture of powdered gold, silver or platinum. As a result, the destroyed object is recreated, saved and decorated with “golden veins”. It gains a new quality and value for the owner. The Japanese, who recognize imperfections or irregularities as the essence of beauty, do not hide the effect of what has happened. They use these imperfections and expose them⁴.

The “aesthetic ennoblement of poverty” already appeared in the 12th century. “To appreciate the feeling of poverty, one must not only accept what is given, but also subjectively arouse the feeling in themselves [...] Daisetsu T. Suzuki calls this state an active, aesthetic complement to poverty”⁵. This concept is defined by two terms: *wabi* and *sabi*. *Wabi* is more general, it concerns a life associated with poverty, insufficiency and imperfection, seeing beauty in transience. *Wabi* (侘) originally meant “despondency” and *sabi* (寂) meant “loneliness”. Both terms are customarily combined. *Wabi* can be translated as severity, poverty, restraint. *Sabi*, in turn, is “mellowness”, an imperfection that results from the age and wear of the object, which is the essence of its beauty. The idea of *wabi sabi* promotes finding the beauty of life, and objects, in their imperfections.

The essence of Japanese aesthetics was skilfully captured by Shūzō Kuki.⁶ In the essay “The Structure of Iki”, the author analyses the specific aesthetics of Japan, which cannot be conveyed in a single word or with a short description. The phenomenon of *iki* touches many aspects of life: from the Japanese mentality and affection for art. *Iki* is the quintessence of aesthetic philosophy but is based on urban life and interpersonal relations. Initially, *iki* defined urban life, in the district of pleasure, in Tokyo’s Fukagawa (Edo period). An attempt to compare this term to European phenomena is doomed to failure, although the French *esprit* and *chic* explain *iki* to a minor extent.

Shūzō Kuki made a successful attempt to capture the mentality of the nation, aesthetics. *Iki* is the quintessence of Japanese culture, in all areas of life, art, its essence is the aestheticization of everyday

4 <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi> [accessed: 4/04/2018].

5 *Estetyka japońska. Antologia*, p. 69.

6 Shūzō Kuki (1888-1941, Japanese philosopher, studied in Germany and France in the 1920’, where he learned about European culture and philosophy. Author of several books on philosophy and aesthetics, the most important of which is „The Structure of Iki”.

life. It is about the sphere of interpersonal relationships, intimate contact between a woman and a man and the whole environment of these relationships: colours and cuts of outfits, food, interior design, equipment and lighting, ways of moving and conversation. *Iki* is often referred to as aesthetic sensitivity or taste. As the philosopher writes in his essay

We can conceive *iki* as an element of a system of taste in various relations with other elements of this system. [...] In each individual case, the taste is accompanied, of course, by a subjective valuating judgment. However, at one time this judgment is expressed in a subjective and clear way, at other times it does not go beyond the limits of subjectivity and is formulated in a vague way⁷.

Bipolarity

Nowadays, one can observe the duality of the nature of the Japanese, especially those living and working in large metropolises which, on the one hand, delight and, on the other, arouse anxiety with the scale of the buildings, the number of people.

Another reference to a film: Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation" (2003). The plot is the feelings of a young woman and an aging actor on the background of Japanese settings: perfectly disciplined corporate employees, similar-looking, devoting their commitment, attachment, knowledge and skills to work. They work their stress off during their free time. They behave just like schoolchildren or students. They exchange suits and uniforms for disguises, restraint and peace - for fun. In the evening, entertainment districts come to life. Love hotels (in Japanese: *rabu hoteru*) are popular; they provide rooms for hours, also used by couples in love or young married couples. Another famous meeting place is the Harajuku district. This is a kind of a "catwalk" on which the most interesting and original costumes created by young people are shown. There are lolis and neogoths mixed with other elements. The cosplayers rule: young girls dressing up in fancy costumes of their favourite characters from manga, anime or computer games, posing for photos and posting selfies⁸ on their social media profiles.

The opening of Japan resulted in the acquisition of certain Western aesthetic and technological patterns. Traditional wood and bamboo are often replaced by concrete, glass and steel. Young people go to the West to educate themselves and learn about new opportunities and technologies. They use the knowledge they acquire creatively, showing different levels of ingenuity. Often, they do not reproduce what they get from the West; instead, they modify it in their own way. One example may be the modern bathroom, previously unknown in Japanese everyday life. Nowadays, it is indispensable in new residential and public buildings. However, it has been "packed with features" such as seat heating or a selectable flushing sound or jet type. Briefly: the West outside, the East inside.

⁷ Kuki S., *Struktura iki*, Kraków 2017, pp. 57–58.

⁸ <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selfie> [accessed: 4/04/2018].

Aesthetics and Design

The differences between Western and Japanese civilizations can be discussed for a long time and examples multiplied. Even the concept of shadow is interpreted differently. Light-dark, the two contrasting concepts like white and black. Light generates various optical phenomena, such as shades cast by objects. In Japanese culture, the shadow is at the basis of being itself; it fits perfectly into this aesthetics with its ephemerality, understatement, ambiguity and delusion.

Aesthetics and culture exert an influence on the style of design, leaving their mark on it. Architecture and the art of establishing gardens are inextricably linked with tradition, climatic conditions, location and aesthetics developed over the centuries. This can be compared to the genetic code DNA: certain rules, characteristics are already encoded in man.

This is perfectly demonstrated by three examples from the world of design. This is the essence of the philosophy of thinking about the object, its function and shape. This is such a vast field that I limit myself to presenting three examples important for understanding of the essence and simplicity of Japanese design. Design theorists often emphasize the role of the Japanese philosophy of thinking about an object in creating the Scandinavian idea of design: simple designs for the needs of ordinary people. This is the main idea of Scandinavian design.

In Japanese design, one of the most important values is respect for functionality, not succumbing to quickly passing fashions or tendencies. The trend is passing, and what counts is quality and classics. References and examples in Europe can already be recognized as classic icons in European design: Rosenthal Mary White tableware, the Burberry trench coat, the Hermes Birkin bag, or the 670Z by Charles and Ray James (the dreams of many businessmen and connoisseurs of design). In a slightly cheaper version of the classics, we have: the citrus juicer for Alessi designed by Phillipe Starck, the Flos Arco lamp designed in 1962 by the Achille brothers and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, or the tweed jacket by Coco Chanel.

There are many more examples. These are the determinants of a classic that has not changed for almost a hundred years. A well-designed product combines classics with the quality of material and workmanship and finds its place and buyers in the following decades.

A key figure in understanding the essence of Japanese design was Sori Yanagi⁹, the Japanese designer (1915-2011) who has played a significant role in the development of the principles of Japanese design. He is a representative of Japanese modern design, a modernist who has combined simplicity and practicality with elements of traditional Japanese craftsmanship. His guiding principle was to use social life as the basis for the design of each object.

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sori_Yanagi [accessed: 4/04/2018].

It is impossible to achieve beauty in design only through cosmetic treatments. It must emanate from within¹⁰.

His father was a philosopher and co-founded a movement called “minge”, taking care of local craftsmanship, respecting manual labour and the tradition of making objects. He presented the idea of this design concept in the wooden stool referring to the shape of butterfly wings (the Butterfly Stool, 1954), or the modern plastic (propylene) version (the Elephant Stool, 1954). Both products are currently supplied by Vitra.

The three examples of Japanese design – brand, designer and design studio – show how the tradition and ideas of aesthetics can be interpreted, continued and developed today.

The Japanese brand MUJI can not be compared to any European brand offering products useful in everyday life. It is defined by three meanings: values, culture and minimalism. Founded in 1980, it is the quintessence of the Japanese way of life, culture and attitude to the world. What counts is quality and not luxury, function and not packaging, simplicity and not superfluous decoration. MUJI perfectly implements the “Less is more” slogan propagated by German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Another one of his thoughts, “It is better to be good than to be original”, complements the previous slogan. These two mottos are perfect for MUJI’s brand philosophy. The brand name is an abbreviation of the word *mujirushi* (brandless) and *ryohin* (high quality).

Items designed for the MUJI brand are anonymous. They are distinguished by a simple packaging and a price tag with Japanese characters. Famous world designers create for the brand, but they do not sign their names on the objects they create. What counts for the brand is the function and usability, not the name of the designer. Objects with the MUJI logo are simple, in neutral colours, in a specific sophisticated aesthetic. And above all, they are practical, functional and universal. They are not subject to trends or fashions. The brand consistently implements its philosophy by introducing new products, but the basis remains unchanged. Simplicity and stylistic minimalism also apply to environmentally-friendly production of items needed for everyday life by conscious, well-informed consumers. Because their beauty lies in simplicity:

Beauty seems to exist but is so difficult to find¹¹.

The brand does not care about advertising and nor does it reveal the names of designers. Because the simplicity of objects is to attract customers with appropriate functions and timeless form. Naoto Fukasawa created functional things for the brand: he designed an iconic object: a white CD player in the form of a square with rounded corners, activated by pulling a string. An icon of contemporary design. It is displayed in the Moma Gallery in New York. This perfectly illustrates the philosophy of the brand: simplicity and ease of use, without unnecessary instructions.

10 „Elle Décoration”, Polish edition, 3 (2016), p. 91.

11 <https://sklep.muji.com.pl/content/4-o-muji> [accessed: 27/03/2018].

The MUJI brand responds to the needs of people with a definite philosophy of life, who focus on good functional design at an affordable price. The repeatability of products gives you the opportunity to attach yourself to them.

An important personality in the Japanese design world is **Naoto Fukasawa** (born in 1956). He is one of the aces of Japanese and world design. Although he may not focus on publicity like his colleagues do, he consistently implements his design idea by skilfully combining the experience gained both in his country and in the West. His main guideline is to make lives of the users of his objects easier, so he designs objects that are easy to use. The centre of his attention, apart from design, are electronics and precision mechanisms. In other words, he sees the possibilities offered by modern technology. This is related to the beginning of his professional career, when he worked for Seiko, the watch manufacturer. While working in the United States for IDEO, he noticed differences in the approach to design: in Japan, designs are made in the context of their environment, users and functions; in America objects become fetishes or icons, and they exist for themselves. According to the designer, a chair is just a chair: it must fulfil its function and not be an object of worship. Thanks to experience gained while working for American and Japanese clients, he learned about the differences in understanding the role of objects. His main idea is to design objects used in the simplest possible way: intentionally, intuitively. A well-designed product should be used without reading the instruction manual. Fukasawa cannot be classified into one category of designers. he works for various global brands: Samsung, Magis, B&B Italia and designs very different but functional products. He says:

I like working in different fields, which I combine into one. This means there is always something new; a source is created from which completely new ideas spring. It is insanely exciting¹².

Traditions of Japanese craftsmanship and design can be found in the works of OKI SATO (born in 1977). He belongs to the younger generation of designers, he has many successes to his credit. He is in the forefront of Japanese and world design. He is better known by the name of the NENDO studio that he founded. This brand is known all over the world. Its characteristic feature are designs that combine the play of matter and its properties. The very name of the studio, established in 2002, perfectly shows the idea: nendo means modelling clay, plastic, flexible material. Material that adapts to the elements. You can design everything from it but also fill in gaps or free spaces. And this is the philosophy of his design in context to the environment: „Creating is something like eating or drinking. It is my natural need, a reflex that I don't seem to control anymore”. He is extremely hardworking. His studio works on several hundred projects at the same time. He admits that he is addicted to design.

I am a design addict. I focus on the project all week, 24 hours a day. And, in the end, I am left with a lot of projects, and each of them is different. That is when I feel excited¹³.

12 „Elle Décoration”, Polish edition, 3 (2016), p. 88.

13 „Elle Décoration”, Polish edition, 3 (2016), p. 86.

The Tradition of Clothing

It is surprising that in view of an average person the clothing of a Japanese is reduced to a kimono. For both women and men. For all occasions, every day and for the wedding. Some people still know that Japanese knights, samurai, wore their characteristic costumes just like our medieval knights. Their armour was most often made of leather. Moviegoers would throw in costumes of Ninja warriors. The power of tradition?

In Europe, clothing has evolved over centuries. Each century developed its own forms of dress, especially among the upper or ruling classes. Testimonies of art, painting, sculpture are an excellent source of learning about the history of European clothing. Seeing certain elements, we can place them in a specific epoch. Women wearing a headgear called *hemin*, conical with a veil, were associated with the Middle Ages and fairy tales. *Verdugado*¹⁴ (the conical frame on which petticoats and outer dress were put) worn by the Portuguese princess Juana, and then by other titled women. Cuts on men's clothing with the Renaissance era. Ruffs, lace and splendour with Baroque. Classicism – this is the empire style. And then, in the 19th century, crinoline, corset and tournure. Art Deco and Art Nouveau, a feminine silhouette referring to a wasp. The 20th century brought a whole spectrum of changes in clothing, after the First and then after the Second World War. Clothing changed, just as styles in art, architecture, painting changed. Similarly, lifestyle, people's surroundings, the shape of buildings, artistic craftsmanship, food and gardens were subject to changes. In Japan, clothing was not subject to epoch-making changes.

The Japanese, even from the simple act of brewing tea, made a ritual, having its own mysticism and meaning. English teas, the so-called *fiveoclock*¹⁵ is just a tradition referring to the queen's custom, drinking tea at this hour, a form of paying homage to the head of the kingdom. These were social, neighbourhood, or family gatherings over a cup of tea and a cookie, not a ceremonial ritual.

In Japanese culture, the strength of tradition is more important than seasonal fashions, trends. Designers in different areas skilfully combine their heritage, Zen philosophy, the beauty of nature with their own image of the object.

The 20th century and contact with the Western world generated the need to adapt to other canons. Opening up to the West. Japanese intellectuals increasingly studied in Europe, learning about this different culture. They returned to their own country and skilfully used the acquired knowledge, combining it with their tradition. Japan, a country with agricultural roots, remained in confinement and isolation for a long time. Dynamic development took place in the years after World War II. The

14 <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortugał> [accessed: 4/04/2018].

15 <https://www.portalspozywczy.pl/napoje/wiadomosci/czas-na-herbate-czyli-skad-sie-wziela-tradycja-five-o-clock,155434.html> [accessed: 4/04/2018].

country invested in modern technologies. In the US, Bill Gates and Paul Allen created Microsoft. In 1976, Steve Jobs presented the first model of Apple, which he created and branded with the characteristic, bitten apple. By the way, this is an excellent marketing ploy – the Big Apple is the term for New York.

Japan is finally entering a decade of development and prosperity. Begins to benefit from the aid offered by the United States. Two electronic brands are gaining popularity: Sony and Toshiba. The automotive industry is developing: Mazda, Toyota. Japan wants to catch up with the Western world. Catch up and chase away. On so prepared ground, it is not surprising that people in Japan began to be interested in clothing and fashion. But understood differently than the classics in the European edition.

The Great Trinity of Fashion Straight from Japan

That's what you can call them: three personalities, differing in terms of style and design and, to a lesser extent, intellectually. They share the country of origin: Japan. At a similar time, they appeared in Europe and made a bloodless revolution in the fashion world, shocking Paris, the fashion capital of the world. Their collections and shows were compared to the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 as the term "Hiroshima chic" appeared in the fashion nomenclature. Together with their collections, they brought a new look to clothing and style. The 1980's emphasized femininity, colour, silhouette line, broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Europe promoted classic moderation and a sexy, feminine look. And they showed a different kind of aesthetics and blackness.

A small digression: in Europe, thanks to the British Queen Victoria, black was associated with mourning. After the death of her beloved husband, this ruler wore only black dresses. Paradoxically, this woman, not interested in fashion, changed the tradition. For her wedding, she wore a white dress and a wreath of orange blossoms. And women wanted to imitate her. White dresses became the canon of the wedding fashion, while black became the colour of mourning. Previously, it had been associated with purists, the seriousness of the robes of lawyers. In Japanese aesthetics, it was the opposite. White did not indicate innocence, it was a sign of mourning. The landing of these three designers on Paris caused a big stir in the elegant established world of European fashion. And, later, the world of intellectuals, artists and photographers was delighted with their designs.

The first of these is **Issey Miyake**, the oldest of the three designers, born in 1938 in Hiroshima and deeply rooted in Japanese tradition and history. He even looked like a descendant of samurai. Valuing minimalism and sophisticated, design statements, he did not use scandals to shock people. During this period, his understanding of the form of clothing compared to other designers was still shocking. Another minor digression: I will add that, stylistically, he is my favourite designer of the three, and his perfume L'Eau d'Issey accompanied me for a long time. His design path is the search for absolute

beauty, purity of sophistication and technological excellence. He is one of the more unusual designers of the 20th century, not interested in success and media publicity. He studied graphic design in Tokyo and then went to Paris to study at the Haute Couture Chamber of Tailoring, and was an assistant to Guy Laroche, Hubert de Givenchy. Later in life, the search paths led him to New York. Having gained practical experience in the art of tailoring, he returned to Japan and founded his own brand: the Issey Miyake Design Studio. He presented his first collections at the beginning of the 1970's, when he showed his style and several elements that he developed even further in subsequent collections. His guiding principle was to avoid excess. The slogan propagated by Mies van der Rohe. "Less is More", became his credo. Minimalism, conciseness of design expression, clothes resembling stone sculptures, geometry referring to the architecture of Robert Mallet Stevensen (1886-1946), the French architect and designer who designed Villa Paul Poiret etc). Another collection is clothes in one size; the body hidden under the fabric does not matter, it perfectly illustrates the motto of Miyake: clothing should fit any shape, any silhouette. It was a concept developed throughout his professional career: clothes that fit as many people as possible, regardless of gender, age or size. Japanese roots, the Zen philosophy and the tradition of a kimono sewn from one piece of fabric were palpable in his collections.

At that time, another Japanese designer, Kenzo Takada, was making a dazzling career in Paris. But these are diametrically opposed styles. Kenzo¹⁶ loves colourful floral patterns (chrysanthemums and poppies) while Miyake is a master of shadow and muting. His clothes are described by a mixture of grey, black and white.

Another experiment is pleated fabrics and the „Pleat Please” design. The designer, in co-operation with engineers and technologists, subjects fabrics to technological processing to achieve the desired effect. He was looking for materials to create light non-creasing clothes adapted to the needs of modern women living actively, working professionally or traveling. Suzy Menkes, the fashion journalist, is a fan of his collections¹⁷.

Miyake used his experience in his next A-POC project, an intellectual concept for cut-it-yourself clothes. In his collections, he often refers to Japanese traditions, e.g. the origami art. This is how the series of Bao Bao bags was created from triangles flexibly connected. And although he no longer designs collections for the Issey Miyake brand, he has not stopped his creative and technological research.

The next person was a woman – **Rei Kawakubo**¹⁸ (born in 1946). Stark appearance, forelock trimmed evenly above the eyes, black clothes and avoidance of giving information perfectly match her

16 https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenzō_Takada [accessed: 4/04/2018].

17 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suzy_Menkes [accessed: 4/04/2018].

18 https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rei_Kawakubo [accessed: 4/04/2018].

style. Founder of the Comme des Garçons brand (French: “like boys”) in “1965” – a meaningful name that perfectly illustrates the designer’s style. It surprises you with its vision of the brand concept but is defined by simplicity and austerity. The name itself shows a different approach to fashion because these are not clothes for men. Subordinated to the designer’s vision, initially in black, they were a contrast to the aesthetics of kawai – a term meaning everything that is pretty, nice, fresh. Girls dressed this way: kawai girls resembled porcelain dolls dressed in pastel clothes¹⁹. Since 1978, she has been designing successful avant-garde men’s collections.

Her style was described as anti-glamour, a new look at elegance. She showed wide trousers, over-length coats and asymmetrical cuts. When it was shown in Paris for the first time, the Rei Kawakubo collection caused a shock. At that time feminine elegance prevailed, while she presented rags, holes and jagged fabrics. She was labelled “Hiroshima chic”. She said this about the design process:

When I start creating collections, a word comes up. I have no idea where it comes from (...). As soon as I find the keyword, I do not develop it logically. I even avoid order in my mind and, instead, look for its opposite, something completely different from it, or something behind it²⁰.

Rei Kawakubo’s clothes are inscribed in Japanese aesthetics, the concept of beauty, the charm of unconscious misery. Therefore, she uses the unfinished, seams on top, disproportion, asymmetry. This is an intelligent kind of fashion you cannot ignore.

I prefer people to look and see strong beauty. It doesn’t matter if they understand. The norm and common ideas don’t make sense²¹.

She showed asymmetrical silhouettes with sewn-on bubbles. One of her most beautiful collections from 2011, the “White Drama”, expressing the idea of the fragility of a woman, was presented in Paris.

And the designer was looking for further challenges. She took to perfumes, but not in their traditional fragrance. Her famous fragrance, Odeur 53, contains such strange smells as cellulose, roasted rubber and coal: there are 53 of them in total.

The fashion world has her to thank for the concept of boutiques which exist no more than a year and spring up far away from recognized places with salons of fashionable brands. She adopts places found: the idea of Guerilla stores, temporary boutiques, has its fans.

The third personality was Rei Kawakubo’s friend and former partner, Yoshij Yamamoto. They shared their background, similar aesthetics and form of clothes, favourite black, but they parted. He is a person of small posture, with a rich imagination and creation, born in 1943. As a child, he experienced

19 Y. Kerlau, *Sekrety mody*, transl. M. Kowalczyk, Wrocław 2014, p. 296.

20 Y. Kerlau, *Sekrety mody*, s. 298 – wywiad z Susy Menkes, „The New York Times [accessed: 8/06/2009].

21 Y. Kerlau, *Sekrety mody*, s. 300; „News&Info”, „Vogue”, 21/05/2012.

the trauma of war during the bombing of Tokyo. If it were not for tailoring, it could have ended badly for him. He is an unusually interesting personality who is capable of designing clothes for the Adidas brand, promoting his sports Y3 line and designing film and theatre costumes. Watching his shows live, you get the impression that you are participating in the mystery of fashion. He is an extremely interesting designer who creates some of his collections for his own brand maintained in his own convention, aesthetics, and others – functional and casual – for the Y3 and Adidas brands. His costumes are characterized by a great dose of poetry. At the beginning of his Parisian career, Journalist Susy Menkes saw him as a harbinger of new directions in fashion.

Physically, the female body is like a desert where dunes, carried by wind, are constantly changing their shapes. I try to create according to this movement²².

An extremely interesting personality.

Similar ideas were shown by the famous Antwerp Six, the graduates of the Royal Academy in Antwerp: Dries van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, Drik va Saene, Walter van Beirendonck, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee.

Conclusion

The culture of Japan attracts the attention of the world. Of course, you can see Asian influences on it but it has also created its own specific nature. It delights people with its beauty and a certain mysticism. However, on the surface, it will never be understood. A kind of humility and respect for tradition, aesthetics and a different understanding of beauty, allows us to appreciate the values of this culture. Modern times and openness to the world have changed the Japanese but this does not mean they have not brought new values to Western aesthetics. Their understanding of permanence and impermanence, perfection and imperfection differs from Western stylistics. But understanding this difference brings new elements into Western reality. Their behaviour and way of life will surprise those who do not understand the basics of Japanese philosophy. Could this uncertainty of existence - or the art of calming down and experiencing beauty in its entire spectrum - possibly be its greatest value?

22 Y. Kerlau, *Sekrety mody*, p. 294; interview with Yamamoto in „L'Express”, 3/12/2010.

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