Design Innovation by Japanese Designers Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto

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Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto introduced and created unorthodox, avant-garde garments on the Paris fashion scene in the 1980s. The Japanese designers' use of innovative construction and deconstruction techniques, combined with a conceptual approach, overturned Western ideas of beauty and form.

Sociologist Diana Crane explains that the term "avant-garde" implies a cohesive group of artists who have a strong commitment to iconoclastic aesthetic values and who reject both popular culture and a middle-class lifestyle. The artists are generally in opposition to dominant social values or established artistic conventions. Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto rebelled against everything that exists in society, according to sociologist Yuniya Kawamura. The Japanese designers found it important not to be confined by tradition, custom, or geography and to be free of any influences in expressing shapes, colors, and textures.

Diana Crane states that an art movement may be considered avant-garde in its approach to the aesthetic context of its artworks if it does any of the following: (1) redefines artistic conventions, (2) utilizes a new artistic tool and technique, or (3) redefines the nature of the art object, including the range of objects that can be considered as artworks. All of these apply to styles that Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto created collectively. Yuniya Kawamura suggests that Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto abandoned the conventions of clothes-making altogether, invented different and original materials as clothing fabrics and, by doing so, introduced and redefined the meaning and nature of both clothes and fashion.

Fashion scholar Barbara Vinken explains that the labeling of Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto as avant-garde in the early 1980s was a response to their creative and original spirit of going beyond the existing and conventional fashion concepts. In 1986 the exhibition "Japon des Avant Gardes 1910–1970" [Japanese Avant-Garde 1910–1970] took place at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and exposed a cultural side of Japan. At the time Japan was attracting attention around the world for its economic growth; this Japanese spirit was defined as avant-garde. The exhibition focused on aesthetics and concepts that existed beyond the realm of European thought. It focused on ideas that could not be discussed in any European language. The Japanese avant-garde being referred to here was avant-garde in the Western sense, but much of what appeared "avant-garde" already existed in the Japanese tradition and aesthetics.

THE INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF CLOTHING

The Japanese designers' construction techniques involved a comprehensive Japanese aesthetic that comprised two concepts: *wabi* (meaning "rustic simplicity") and *sabi* (meaning "beauty that comes with age"). When applied to human-made objects, *wabi* also refers to imperfections and incompleteness arising from the process of construction. Characteristics of *wabi-sabi* include asymmetry, simplicity, and modesty.

Kawakubo's work included asymmetry, misplaced garment details, and "unfinished" looks, as if to emphasize the imperfect and incomplete quality of the garments, consistent with the *wabi* aesthetic. This led to finished garments appearing to be constructed upside down and inside out, thus challenging the notions of perfection. In Kawakubo's 1981 collection, trousers incorporated sweater cuffs around the ankles. Oversized overcoats and shapeless boiled knitwear constructed with holes were presented for her fall/winter 1982 collection and the asymmetrical, torn blouses of her spring/summer 1983 collection also featured characteristics of *wabi-sabi*. Similarly, Yamamoto, in his 1983 collection, featured blended wool coats with edges of the wool left raw and unfinished. The coats were loosely constructed and held together with metal rings. The pockets were constructed like bags and placed on to the back of the coats with minimum detail, exhibiting characteristics of *wabi-sabi*.

For these three Japanese designers, their starting point was to extensively study the relationship between the way fabric hangs and the gravitational force of the earth. Kawakubo's black rayon jacquard dress with a wide rectangular skirt, featured in the fall/winter 1983 collection, resulted in asymmetrical and indeterminate forms through experimentation with the weight of the fabric. Yohji Yamamoto used flat construction coupled with draping and wrapping, eliminating the use of seams and darts. Yamamoto's experimentation with the weight of the fabric can be seen in his silk and wool blend dresses of spring/summer 1998. His pleated silk crepe dress of spring/summer 2005 also featured a large pleated braid that was draped around the model's neck, showcasing Yamamoto's skill in twisting and wrapping fabric and not letting the fabric look or feel forced into a shape.

While the Western standard of tailoring was based on a form that fitted the contours of the body, the Japanese designers instead focused on the space between the body and the garment. This space gave the wearer the possibility of inhabiting the garment naturally, without being restricted by a predetermined form. The space created between the body and cloth is a Japanese aesthetic referred to as *ma* (which means "space" according to Akiko Fukai, one of Japan's most respected fashion historians and director and chief curator of the Kyoto Costume Institute).

DECONSTRUCTION IN FASHION

To understand what deconstruction means, we first need to define what is meant by construction. Construction is the foundation of clothing and of fashion design, and involves creating a three-dimensional garment from a two-dimensional design or pattern in order to create a shape and fit on a moving body. Garment construction involves both technical and design application. When creating a garment, the designer decides on its construction lines, dart positions, seams, pockets, collar, edge finishing, volume, and structure. The making of clothes is about how to relate flat fabric to a three-dimensional figure in the form of the human body.

European-style couture involves giving three-dimensional form to fabric by using curved lines and darts to fit to the body. The Japanese designers were free of European couture methods; their designs were based on the notion of the kimono. The kimono, in contrast to the construction of Western clothing, is an assemblage of rectangular pieces of fabric, which is flat when not worn. The space between the body and garment is most important to the Japanese, therefore these designers sought to create a new relationship between clothes and the body.

The term "deconstruction" originated in the writings of French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s. It was originally an attitude of the time rather than a defined movement or methodology. Amy Spindler, a well-known fashion critic in the 1980s, was quoted by Harold Koda, lead curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as stating that deconstruction was a rebellion against fashion's heritage. Deconstruction flourished in the West, and has become part of a formalized global cultural vocabulary. According to Cher Potter, senior research fellow in "design futures" at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the approach of deconstruction has spread over the past forty years through architecture, music, and design. Patricia Mears, deputy director at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, has suggested that deconstruction and its relationship to contemporary fashion design have yet to be fully explored by fashion theorists, critics, and curators.

It can be argued that the first manifestation of deconstruction began on the streets of London. Following the effeminate mods and leather-clad rockers, punk emerged in the 1970s as an aggressive counterculture. Punk's shredded black garb was a publicizing of outrage and antipathy to society. These anarchist libertarians established a significant "tear down and destroy" aesthetic, and the influential "punk look" became associated with clothing that was worn unfinished, inside out, and ravaged.

The author Alison Gill defined deconstruction in terms of fashion as a garment that was unfinished, coming apart, recycled, transparent, and grungy. She suggests that deconstruction was the literal dismantling of clothes in order to destroy fashion. Cher Potter suggests that the deconstruction philosophy was aimed at un-building the constructs of a culture inherited from previous generations. She states that Derridean deconstruction challenged the nonvisible form of meaning; such disciplines as architecture and fashion picked up on the "construction" in "deconstruction" as it applied to their own visible fields. In architecture, "construction" refers to the precepts of building; in clothing, to a set of traditional rules for tailoring and fashion. To "deconstruct" in these disciplines is to dismantle the form. Removing the term from its philosophical origins, designers and artists established an aesthetic of fragmentation, disruption, and displacement.

Patricia Mears suggests that Kawakubo and Yamamoto were clearly not the first designers to appropriate elements of deconstruction in their work, but the first to formalize it completely. Their work seemed to incarnate a similar distress in relation to Western fashion. Kawakubo's and Yamamoto's work promoted ragged edges, irregular hemlines, crinkled fabrics, and ill-fitting layers, and was termed "Le Destroy" by the French. However, there was no reason to believe that Derrida's idea was the motivating force behind the pioneering designs of Kawakubo and Yamamoto. Therefore Mears suggests that the official "birth" of deconstruction in fashion occurred in 1981 with the Paris debuts of Kawakubo and Yamamoto.

Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto not only blended Japanese and Western fashions, but also created an opportunity for unfashionable traditional clothing to be acknowledged and transformed into fashion. Often referred to as antifashion, as defined by anthropologists Ted Polhemus and Lynn Proctor, their method constituted a system designed to overthrow the existing regulations and norms of fashion design. These Japanese designers are regarded as having shared a disregard for the fashion system and making self-conscious attempts at deviating from basic dressmaking conventions. Many examples have been cited in which they experimented with construction techniques or the way that the cloth is cut, which led to innovative designs that brought acclaim and recognition from the media and their peers.

Issey Miyake deconstructed Western sartorial conventions by suggesting different ways of wearing a garment. In spring/summer 2010, he recreated the pleated dresses using advanced technology, with many different openings for the head and three sleeves instead of two, allowing the wearer to decide which hole or sleeve to use when wearing the garment.

Rei Kawakubo embraced the anomalies of construction by creating deconstructed, unfinished clothing with deliberately aged or flawed fabrics, which is demonstrated in her fall/winter 2007 collection of deconstructed and reconstructed dresses. ("Construction" in clothing refers to a set of traditional rules for tailoring and fashion, while "deconstruction," in these disciplines, is to dismantle the form; "reconstruction" is to reassemble.) Kawakubo demonstrated this technique by first constructing child-sized dresses, deconstructing them and then reconstructing them into adult-sized dresses. Her deconstruction of Western tailoring routinely questioned the necessary symmetry of a garment, be it hemline, waistline, shoulder, or lapel, or the correct placement of a sleeve or seam. In her spring/summer 2008 collection, Kawakubo returned to the theme of deconstruction and reconstruction, this time experimenting with tailored menswear. The jackets were deconstructed into fragments of vertically sliced half-jackets and then reconstructed with ladies' blouses. The skirts and hemlines were unevenly constructed and held together by knotting.

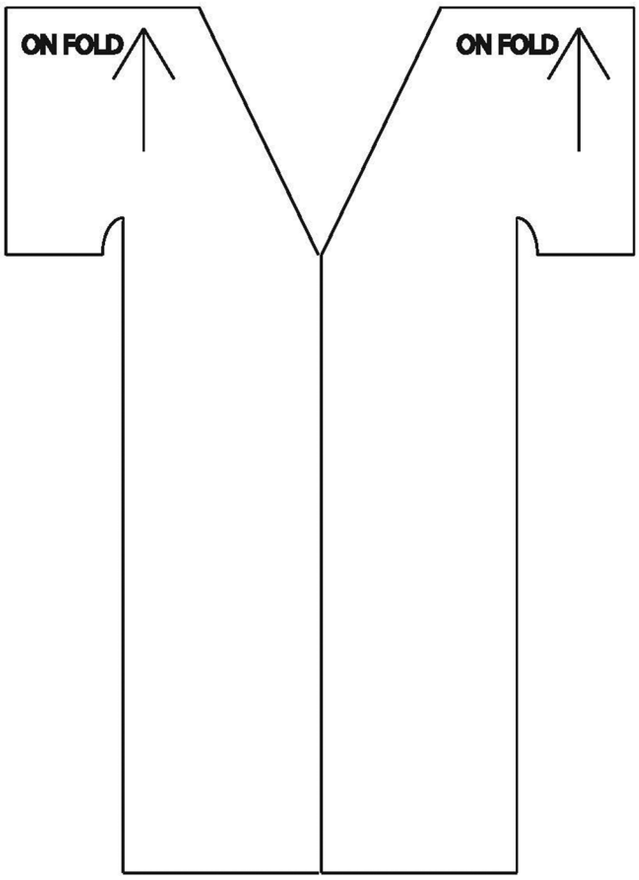
Similarly to Kawakubo, Yamamoto's fall/winter collection of 2001 also featured jackets with complex construction techniques: the wearer's arm was trapped in the jacket's folds, resulting in only one functional sleeve. Voluminous coats with asymmetric lengths had misplaced collars constructed toward the shoulders. This contrasted with traditional collar construction, where collars are positioned at the center front of a coat or jacket, thus

challenging the notions of perfection. Yamamoto also merged masculine tailoring and unique pattern construction for his fall/winter 2003 ready-to-wear collection. Coats and jackets made of black-and-white houndstooth fabric varied from bold checks to finer menswear woolens, with no use of traditional construction. Yamamoto reshaped the symmetry of clothes by introducing misplaced collars on fronts of the coats.

FLAT CONSTRUCTION

One of the construction techniques used by the Japanese designers was flat construction. Flat construction refers to a garment being constructed in a two-dimensional form, free of the guided seams or darts which are traditionally used in creating form-fitting garments and may include draping a piece of flat fabric over the body.

Issey Miyake used flat construction and drapery in his "A Piece of Cloth" (APOC) concept in 1976. The concept of *ma* (excessive space between the body and the fabric) was used in the "Shell Coat" he designed for his spring/summer 1985 collection. Similar to the effect of the kimono, the Shell Coat simplified a woman's figure into a willowy column, completely hiding the curves and beauty of the female form. Seen through European eyes, which were used to clothing contoured to the shape of the body, Miyake's clothing was perceived as loose-fitting, shapeless, and allowing maximum freedom. Miyake's use of flat construction can also be seen in his spring/summer 1988 collection, where he once again used a single piece of cloth with no darts and minimal seams to create a synthetic raincoat.



A Japanese kimono using flat construction.
Illustration by Sandhya Lalloo-Morar, 2015.

Rei Kawakubo's experimentation with flat construction, geometric shapes, and straight lines to construct clothes with minimal seams and darts can be seen in her earlier works in the photographs taken by Naoya Hatakeyama. Kawakubo's beige wool felt coat and dark blue rayon dress of her fall/winter 1983–1984 collection were comprised of two-dimensional sections that become complex when laid out on a surface. The construction of the coat was such that, when folded, the poncho-like coat created a geometry of straight lines. The coat was free of any formal seams or darts and had no buttons or fastenings, much like traditional Japanese traveling coats, which were simple and practical.

Yohji Yamamoto's use of flat construction can be seen in his wool and felt coat of his fall/winter 1996 and fall/winter 1989–1990 collections. Yamamoto constructed a cape by imagining that the body was round; this resulted in the cape being wrapped around the body.

RESHAPING THE BODY

Miyake is one of the most experimental designers with regard to materials, using iron, paper, cane, bamboo, silicone, and stones to reshape the human form. This can be seen in his rattan bustier of 1982, which was woven by Shochikudo Kosuge, a bamboo and rattan craftsman. The bustier exaggerated the shape of the torso and shoulders when worn.

Issey Miyake collaborated with textile director Makiko Minagwa to experiment with paper-like pleating on linen crepe, woven cotton, polyester, and jersey, seeking functionality with interesting textures and to develop new textiles using modern technologies. By 1988, Miyake had developed and refined a revolutionary pleating technique, in which polyester was cut into the shape of a garment several times the desired final size and then heat-pressed to create permanent pleats. The ironed pleats changed the dimensions of the dress, making the fabric project from the body—thus changing the natural shape of the human body. The "Minaret" dress Miyake created in spring/summer 1995 exemplified this shape-altering process, as the design resembled a Japanese hanging paper lantern and folded down into a flat, circular shape when not being worn.

For the 2010 collection for his 132 5 fashion line, Miyake collaborated with computer scientist Jun Mitani, who created a software program that generated formulas to construct three-dimensional, geometric shapes from single sheets of paper. Miyake and his design team adapted the process and applied it to fabric, resulting in flat, folded shapes that opened into wearable garments. Rather than cutting and sewing, the fabric was held in place by a series of strategic permanent creases, which changed the shape of the human body when worn.

Yohji Yamamoto designed oversized clothing that reshaped the natural form of the human body by exaggerating shoulders, hips, and thighs: this can be seen in his fall/winter 1982 collection. The trousers, shirts, and coats were oversized and the shape of the wearer dictated how the layers fell on the body, creating space between the body and the clothing. Another example of reshaping the body appeared in Yamamoto's fall/winter collection of 2009, where he created a molded two-tone felt coat with multiple folds, which exaggerated the shoulders, hips, and thighs.

Rei Kawakubo explored new body forms by adding padding to unusual areas of the body such as the neck, back, and arms, and in so doing challenged the normative Western definitions of beauty. In her fall/winter 1983–1984 and spring/summer 1984 collections, she presented a range of garments created with irregularly braided, wide-knit panels that twisted around the torso to create volume and exaggerated the shape of the wearer's body.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fashionable European women wore pads and bustles to manipulate their busts and buttocks to fit the feminine ideal of the time represented by accentuated curves of the female form. (The bustle was a framework worn under the back of a skirt, just below the waist, and supported drapery piled in this position.) However, in 1997, Kawakubo played with this ideal by introducing bumps and lumps in unusual places to distort the body. She used unfamiliar pattern pieces to create body-altering shapes. Kawakubo's aim was to explore new body forms so that the body and the dress became one. Her dresses had pockets into which down-filled pillows were inserted on the neck, upper back, hips, and buttocks, which created extreme silhouettes that had never been seen on the catwalk.

For her fall/winter 2007 collection, Kawakubo revisited lumps and bumps, incorporating padded bows, flowers, and pairs of three-dimensional hands that looked as if they were grasping the hips of a skirt. Again in her fall/winter 2010 collection, padded sections were added to the clothes to distort the contours of the body, including the shoulders, back, and hips. She explained it as "rethinking the body." For Kawakubo, "The body becomes dress becomes body," distorting the notion of the perfect female shape and breaking the stereotypical design of women's clothing.

A design by Rei Kawakubo displayed at the "Blog.mode: Addressing Fashion" exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute on 17 December 2007 in New York City.
Photo by Amy Sussman/Getty Images.

UNISEX CLOTHING

Clothing represents a major symbol of gender that allows other people to immediately discover an individual's biological sex. However, by drawing on Japanese traditions where both men and women wore the kimono, the Japanese designers challenged the normative gender specificity characteristic of Western clothes on the Paris fashion scene. Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto often experimented with gender-neutral or unisex clothing.

In the oversized clothes created by Miyake for his spring/summer 1985 and fall/winter 1987 collections, the gender of the person wearing the garments was concealed, blurring the line between menswear and women's wear. Issey Miyake focused on the space between the fabric and the body to create anti-structural, oversized clothing that concealed the curves of the female form and resulted in gender-neutral or unisex clothing.

Rei Kawakubo eliminated boundaries between masculine and feminine by combining traditional formal gentleman's clothing with romantic feminine poufs, ruffles, and corsetry, making gender ambiguity limitless. Kawakubo's designs in the early 1980s were also unisex and shapeless, concealing the body. Universally, females' jackets are buttoned right to left, but in Kawakubo's fall/winter 1988 collection, oversized coats for women were unconventionally buttoned from left to right.

Yohji Yamamoto experimented with oversized clothes, concealing the sexual identity of the person wearing the garment and blurring the boundary between sexes, to create unisex clothing. Yamamoto's fall/winter 1984–1985 collection consisted of large pieces of stiff fabric draped and folded around the body, thereby concealing the sexual identity of body.

Yamamoto frequently created Western business suits without padded shoulders or lining and expanded the armholes, creating a softer, more comfortable and feminine fit. In his fall/winter 2002 collection, female models were presented with dirty faces and matted hair in oversized men's suits: this made the models look like thin men. For his spring/summer 2012 collection, draped skirts for men replaced pants, crossing gender barriers. While gender roles are conventionally defined by social rules and regulations and substantiated by the clothing worn, Yamamoto challenged these norms by interchanging traditional designs for each gender. He created softer shapes and baggy fits that questioned the ideal masculine angularity, while his skirts questioned the Western sexual silhouettes.

In her fall/winter 2004 collection, Kawakubo returned to concepts of eliminating boundaries between masculine and feminine that she had explored in the past. The designer achieved this by juxtaposing tailored trousers, dropping at the waist to reveal mannish underpants, and flat brogues with feathers, skirts embellished with bows and flowers, and lacy mesh socks. In her fall/winter 2006 collection, Kawakubo's models wore Venetian carnival masks, disguising the model's sexual identity.

Kawakubo's ready-to-wear collection for men of fall/winter 2011 featured male and female models wearing tailcoats and elongated shirts in liberal proportions with loose tailoring and clashing patterns. This made the men's collection unisex, and it was difficult to tell the female models from the male ones. For her fall/winter 2011 ready-to-wear collection, Kawakubo took a step further, in a collection of clothes that were half menswear and half women's wear. When the collection was viewed from one side it featured a schoolboy's jacket and pants; viewed from the other side, the same garment featured a silk blouse with a sheer front with frilly bottoms; or a trench on one side and frilled shorts on the other, making gender ambiguity limitless.

CONCLUSION

The Japanese designers defied traditional sartorial construction methods by employing flat construction methods, which eliminated the use of traditional darts and seams. Flat construction, combined with unfinished looks and asymmetrical forms, was based on the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*. The Japanese designers used these techniques to deconstruct and reconstruct their designs, thereby creating new forms.

The designs that Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo have introduced over the past four decades demonstrate unique construction techniques of minimizing seams, changing traditional sartorial construction, and creating asymmetric garments that differed from traditional construction methods of the West. To this day, these anomalies of construction, which consisted of creating deconstructed, unfinished clothing with deliberately aged or flawed fabrics, have been embraced as design techniques.

The aforementioned designers have demonstrated that design should not be constrained by the shape of the human body and have proposed a vision of considering new ways of constructing clothing.

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Sandhya Lalloo-Morar