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Japan's Fashion Shock Wave

An exhibition at the Denver Art Museum shows how Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, Kenzo Takada and other designers turned Parisian fashion ideas upside down in the 1980s

Alexandra Wolfe



talks backstage with models at a 1986 fashion show, inspired by Western cowgirls.

JEAN-LUCE HURÉ

Women's fashion underwent profound changes in the decades after World War II, but by 1980, Parisian styles still often seemed to be all about high heels and red lipstick. Then a set of Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo and Kenzo Takada burst onto the scene, and everything changed.

A new exhibit opening Sept. 11 at the Denver Art Museum, "Shock Wave: Japanese Fashion Design, 1980s-90s," showcases the ways these designers disrupted the fashion world with their flat shoes, billowy dresses and bold, unusual shapes.



Miyake's 'Jacket with Transformable Bustle and Asymmetric Skirt' from the Autumn/Winter 1986 collection, left, is made from Japanese ikat-printed cotton. Mr. Miyake came out with a 1984 cape covered in huge black and white checks that almost looked like an accordion, right. PHOTOS: DENVER ART MUSEUM: NEUSTETER TEXTILE COLLECTION(2)

Their style challenged “the whole vision of seduction and the way a beautiful woman should look,” says curator Florence Müller. She adds that these designers also asked, “Why does a woman always have to look so nice and cute and beautiful just for the men?”



Designer Kansai Yamamoto and the model Sayoko pose at a party. PHOTO: JEAN-LUCE HURÉ

Ms. Müller came to Denver from Paris last year, where she worked at the Louvre's decorative-arts museum and then as an independent curator and professor at the French Institute of Fashion. Living in the city through the 1970s and '80s, she witnessed firsthand Paris fashion critics' negative reaction to the Japanese designers' styles—the “shock wave” of the exhibit's title.

The show includes 70 outfits whose pop-culture motifs and androgynous, often unfinished tailoring ran counter to the fitted, feminine silhouettes of the French fashion world. Ms. Müller assembled the garments from 20 pieces that she acquired at auction and in loans from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and San Francisco's de Young Museum, as well as from private collectors.

In 1980, Paris was the undisputed center of the fashion world, and the newcomers “understood nobody was waiting for obscure Japanese designers,” she says. So “they had to propose something really extreme, avant-garde and original.” Though some of the designers entered the fashion scene seamlessly as friends of French counterparts, others, such as Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons founder Ms. Kawakubo, experienced more of a backlash from their critics in the Paris fashion world. “The haute couture organization was like a fortress,” says Ms. Müller.



Kansai Yamamoto's 1980 'Jacket' was printed with a graphic that included his name. PHOTO: DENVER ART MUSEUM, NEUSTETER TEX

But the Japanese designers were determined to break through. They were different in part because many took their inspiration from the art world. Ms. Kawakubo had been a fine-arts student and in the mid-1980s incorporated portraits of artists such as Francesco Clemente and dealers like Leo Castelli into her ads. In the 1990s, she collaborated with artist Cindy Sherman and choreographer Merce Cunningham to come up with new designs.



Yohji Yamamoto's women's suit looked like a man's, but had exposed seams and lining. PHOTO: GUY MARINEAU

At his brand, Yohji Yamamoto even created a position of art director, tasked with branding the clothing and producing brochures to look like art catalogs.

Their stores followed suit, eschewing the look of a typical fashion boutique, says Ms. Müller. "It was looking like an art gallery that was almost empty with concrete on the floor and on the walls." The designers presented garments individually, like paintings, rather than in a rack of different sizes. "Of course, in the storage next to the boutique, you would have all the sizes," she adds.

Some critics said the clothing looked like it had been through a war. Ms. Müller shares a story told to her by a woman who worked for Comme des Garçons and was wearing the brand when she met a psychiatrist colleague of her husband's. The psychiatrist quipped, "My friend, your wife needs psychoanalysis!"

The Shock Wave designers persisted. Comme des Garçons showcased an oversize tunic dress in 1983 that resembled an origami bathrobe. Mr. Yamamoto designed a women's suit that

looked like a man's but had exposed seams and lining and an asymmetrical closure. Mr. Miyake created a 1984 cape covered in huge black-and-white checks that folded like an accordion. And Junya Watanabe dressed his runway models in flat shoes, color-block dresses and hats that looked like intergalactic helmets.

By the 1990s, the fashion-art connection was beginning to work both ways. “Suddenly it was great also for the art world to have the glamour of the fashion world and bring fashion into the art gallery,” says Ms. Müller.



Left, Rei Kawakubo, founder of Comme des Garçons, stands backstage at her spring 1986 fashion show wearing her own black ensemble and flat shoes. On the right a 1997 Comme de Garçons gingham outfit with padding. *PHOTO: JEAN-LUCE HUR?; DENVER ART MUSEUM: NEUSTETER TEXTILE COLLECTION*

The style of the Japanese designers in Paris still prevails today, she says—for example, in the work of John Galliano (formerly at [Christian Dior](#)) and Helmut Lang. Fashion lines, both high and low, she notes, incorporate such flourishes as unfinished seams, relaxed tunics and sleek, minimalist boutiques.

Partly thanks to the Shock Wave, more brands seem to care about creating clothes and shoes for comfort rather than for catwalks, Ms. Muller says: “Now you have a feeling they’re working *for* women.”