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In the age of video games...kimono

In these days dominated by video games and TV programs designed with the thought that anything less than frenzied action with new plot twists three times a minute might invite boredom, and in which unironed jeans and T-shirts are not only tolerated but positively celebrated as the epitome of cool, the sight of a woman passing by in kimono is akin to a beautiful, fleeting apparition. Appearing suddenly out of the crowd, she disappears around the corner just as swiftly, like a dream, embodiment of the “ephemeral beauty” for which the Japanese have such an enduring love.

Ephemerality. This without a doubt is the basis of the Japanese view of life, and root of the concept of wabi-sabi that we discussed in last month’s edition. It is a view of life attributable to the geographical conditions of Japan as a country. The Japanese understand that the world in which they live could be extinguished at any moment; earthquakes, tsunamis out of the blue...disaster heaped upon disaster over the centuries serving as a constant reminder of the impermanence of this earthly realm.

Undoubtedly it is this powerful awareness that all things must pass that has nurtured in the Japanese their love for the transience of life and things and the ease with which everything can change. The same could be said for their love of materials that have acquired the patina of age. It reminds them that everything will one day meet its demise. Japan’s almost religious obsession with cherry blossoms, the epitome of transience, is grounded in the same idea. Cherry blossoms last just a few days, their petals whisked swiftly away on gentle spring breezes, instantly coating the surrounding earth in pink snow.

Having become such a rare sight even in Japan, perhaps the kimono is now more precious than ever to the Japanese in this era of media hype and frenzy.

One public holiday, as I strolled through the Meiji Jingu shrine among throngs of young kimono-clad women, I was reminded of something said by the famous Japanese couturier Yohji Yamamoto:

“There is something oddly moving about the sight of a woman viewed side on, or from the back on a slight diagonal. A sense of treading close on the heels of something passing, something going by. I guess you could call it a sensation of missing. The same goes for a lingering waft of fragrance. There is something heartrending about it. That idea of being seduced by something passing by is one of the things I admire in women. So I can only ever see a woman as someone who passes by, someone who disappears.”

He adds, “So it comes down to the back. To my mind, clothing is something that should be made not from the front, but from the back.”

Furthermore, he concludes, “It is the back that supports a garment: if the back is not properly made, the front is nothing.”

This final comment of Yamamoto’s applies to all real clothing, no matter where in the world. The kimono, a surprisingly good example, is a particularly special case. Likewise it’s a rule always respected by Parisian haute couture. In the world of pret-a-porter it is common to economize on fabric for the back of a garment, but not in made-to-measure fashion. To use the haute couture term, a garment has to “fall” properly. At Chanel, to maintain perfect “fall” fine gold-colored chains are worked into the hem of a jacket to act as weights.

Returning to the kimono and its splendid rear-view silhouette, we find that the curve of the upward-spreading collar highlights the beauty of the nape of the neck, while the back is adorned with the tied obi, or sash. The obi brings the whole of the kimono together as a single

garment without the use of buttons, zips or domes. Inevitably one imagines the kimono slipping open simply by unknitting the long silk sash...very sensual. But even the most stunning kimono is nothing without all its various accessories, such as the undergarment known as a juban, the han’eri neckpiece overlapping the collar of the juban, the obi, and cords of various sorts. These not only stop the kimono from falling off, they form the draping that defines the kimono’s silhouette.

Dressing in kimono is a true example of “handwork”. For those of us living in today’s mechanized age, it’s an art ripe for rediscovery along with a delight mingled with pleasure for the soul.

*Yohji Yamamoto’s comments are from Takaga fuku, saredo fuku Yohji Yamamoto ron (“It’s only clothing, yet clothing it is: In the words of Yohji Yamamoto” (Shueisha).



Francoise Morechand (Fashion essayist)

Born 1936 in Montparnasse, Paris. Came to Japan in 1958 after studying Japanese at the Sorbonne. Worked as a teacher on NHK’s Tanoshii Furansugo French language education series, and lecturer in French at Ochanomizu Women’s University, before returning to France in 1964. Came to Japan again in 1974 to manage Chanel’s beauty department there. With a career spanning French teacher, TV “tarento”, writer, and fashion coordinator, in 2004 Morechand’s longstanding contribution to Franco-Japanese cultural ties was recognised by the French government with the awarding of the Légion d’honneur. Visiting professor at Kyoritsu Women’s University. Overseas trade advisor to the French government. North Asia representative for the Conseil Supérieur des Français de l’Etranger (CSFE). International advisor to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Ishikawa Prefecture tourism ambassador.

Yasuko Sensyu (Illustrator)

Leading creator of adorable “healing art”. All her work, starting with calligraphy employing her Level 7 calligraphic skills, and including her illustrations and essays, is suffused with a warmth that soothes whoever picks it up. Her diverse portfolio includes paintings for the interior of Le Comptoir de Benoit, chef Alain Ducasse’s first restaurant venture in Osaka; murals at the En-Japan head office, plus illustrating, brand logos, wall paintings and essays. She was also responsible for the “Japan Trump” playing cards showcasing famous sightseeing spots nationwide (supported by the Japan National Tourism Organization), extending this concept further across Asia with a sub-brand for the Singaporean tourism office, and Indonesian Trump cards.

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