

Yohji Yamamoto and the Museum: A Contemporary Fashion Narrative

Alexis Romano

Yohji Yamamoto's garments have featured in exhibitions examining the histories of design, costume, radical fashion, and Japanese art, organized by curators of architecture, design and Asian art, as well as fashion specialists. His place in the historical narrative is far from standardized: curators contextualize his work as exotically Japanese or revolutionary, high art or high fashion. Furthermore, most exhibitions have categorized Yamamoto under more than one of these labels, presenting the viewer with different layers of contradictory meaning. What is it about Yamamoto's work that lends itself to such different museum narratives?

The retrospective exhibition Yohji Yamamoto at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which fittingly marks the thirtieth anniversary of the designer's debut in the Paris fashion industry, allows curator Ligaya Salazar to comment on a defined, substantial body of work, effectively placing Yamamoto in a timeline of fashion history. Prior to this timely retrospective, however, his clothing had already been displayed in more than 30 museum-based exhibitions in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.¹ This essay charts the life of the garment, out of the hands of the creator, retailer and consumer and into those of the curator.

Exhibitions of dress present the curator with challenging interpretative choices, whether they are documenting a particular period, culture, or creator, or highlighting a theme or element.²

Putting a garment on display elevates its status, labels it as an exemplar and distances it from its original role as something 'worn'.

Retrospective exhibitions of living designers can complicate matters further, as the curator is challenged with interpreting a continuously evolving body of work, and his or her vision is in contention with the designer's own. Uncomfortable conflicts of interest are also raised: New York Times fashion writer Guy Trebay has likened such shows to 'authorized biographies' and 'historical fictions'.³

White Cotton Shirt, Summer
Wool Jacket, Spring/Summer
1997, Model



Yohji Yamamoto:
widely exhibited



Yamamoto's first museum exhibition in 1983 came just two years after his debut prêt-à-porter collection in Paris in 1981, which incited visceral reactions of both wonder and contempt. The newspaper *Le Figaro*, for example, described the clothes as the 'World War III survivors' look'.⁴ Others declared his work visionary and an important contribution to fashion.

This perception of his clothes as different from the glamorous fashion norm of the 1980s and part of a larger artistic phenomenon first caused museum curators to take notice.

A reviewer from the French fashion publication *Jardin des Modes*, describing the 1982 shows of Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo's *Comme des Garçons* label, declared, 'These two collections are in absolute rupture with our Western vision'.⁵ In the same Occident-centric mindset, many commentators in the fashion press went on to paint the picture of a 'Japanese invasion', referencing several waves of designers from Japan who appeared on the French fashion scene, beginning with Hanae Mori, Kenzo Takeda and Issey Miyake in the 1970s and later Yamamoto and Kawakubo.

This phenomenon not only puzzled and fascinated many in the fashion industry, it has also attracted the attention of the wider art and museum community.⁶

A *New Wave in Fashion: Three Japanese Designers*, the 1983 exhibition at the Phoenix Art Museum featuring the work of Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo, set the tone for interpreting these designers in a gallery context. This exhibition accompanied a display of contemporary Japanese ceramics and textiles in the museum's decorative arts gallery, including textile designs by Keisuke Serizawa, one of Japan's 'Living National Treasures'. This juxtaposition effectively placed the three fashion designers in the narratives of Japanese art and costume, portraying them as foreigners working on Western soil. Describing their work as 'a reaction against so-called conventional dressing', curator Jean C. Hildreth further contextualized these designers in a narrative of atypical dress in the broader history of fashion, comparing the garments of Yamamoto, Miyake and Kawakubo to radical historic fashions, such as Paul Poiret's hobble skirt and the 1960s miniskirt.⁷



Since this first show, many museums showing Yamamoto's work have maintained the now-established tropes of the Japanese fashion phenomenon, notably the designers' classification as a group, as 'avant-garde' and as separate from 'Western' fashion. These exhibitions contend that the designers draw inspiration from traditional Japanese clothing and dressmaking methods, whereby oversized and layered shapes conquer form-fitting and tailored cuts.⁹ Textile innovation and fine craftsmanship are other features commonly attributed to the designs Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, among others, described as 'Neo-Japonism'.^{9,10} Contemporary Japanese Fashion: the Mary Baskett Collection, an expanded version of the Cincinnati Art Museum's 2007 exhibition *Where Would You Wear That*, opened in October 2009 at the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. This exhibition, held more than 20 years after *A New Wave in Fashion*, adhered to accepted guidelines in its exploration of the work of Miyake, Kawakubo and Yamamoto, situating them as Eastern avant-garde designers, whose clothes are

characterized by asymmetry, raw edges, unconventional construction, oversized proportions and monochromatic palettes.¹¹

In 2003, the Musée des Arts Asiatiques, a small museum in Nice devoted to the art of China, Japan, India and Indochina, presented *XXIème Ciel: Mode in Japan*, displaying garments by Yamamoto, Miyake, Kawakubo and Junya Watanabe. Like many scholars who interpret these designers' clothes as Japanese on a theoretical level, the director, Marie-Pierre Foissy Aufrère, saw in them an intrinsic link to ancient Asian cultures and that côté magique or mysterious quality found in Japanese art. She was met with initial refusal, however, when proposing the idea to the designers who rejected having their work presented as outdated Orientalism.¹²

Instead of providing the usual discourse on radical Japanese fashion, the curators Pamela Golbin, curator of twentieth-century fashion at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile, and Patricia Mears, deputy director of the Museum at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, followed Foissy Aufrère in her goal to evoke 'the beautiful qualities of Japanese design from a decidedly Western point of view'.¹³ French artist Gotscho – whose work often incorporates fashion – designed the exhibition space, placing the garments in abstract theatrical displays often integrating fashion props, such as clothes racks and mannequins, displayed together with items from the museum's permanent collection. Gotscho's *Robe X Lustre*, a dress from Yamamoto's spring/summer 1999 collection interwoven with a chandelier, lying decadently on the ground on a red carpet, installed alongside paintings and sculpture from the museum's collection, thus contrasted familiar yet disparate objects.

The complex relationship many scholars have noted between Yamamoto's clothing and the wearer's body and identity enhanced the metaphor of the chandelier as the female body. These beautiful yet unexplained juxtapositions presented the viewer with a mix of contemporary fashion, Asian fine arts and contemporary French art.

Patricia Mears contends that the organizers' goals to find common threads linking these works were most successfully met in the case of Yamamoto, whose romantic clothing draws both from the past and the 'degradation' of the contemporary world.¹⁴ That is, Yamamoto aims to create clothing that exists outside of the seasonal fashion trend system and belongs to the past or to no particular period.¹⁵

Mears argues that the press almost always labels these 'avant-gardists' as inseparable from their Asian heritage. She questions what classifies their clothes as Japanese if their separate bodies of work or creative processes neither resemble each other nor the standard in Japan.¹⁶ 'I happen to have been born in Japan. But I've never labelled myself in that way', Yamamoto claims.¹⁷ Although the designer has often denied exploiting his Japanese roots, he has also embraced them at times.¹⁸ While his origins and cultural influences may serve as revelatory tools, solely tagging Yamamoto's work as Japanese in exhibitions relies on a simplification of Japanese dress, whether traditional kimono or contemporary Japanese clothing. Still, Yamamoto's Eastern classification in the fashion system reinforces this 'Japonism' in the museum world, which often presents a blend of oriental signifiers. Yuniya Kawamura, assistant professor of sociology at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, contends that non-Westerners, specifically those from Japan, use their ethnicity to exist as exotic outsiders within the privileged French fashion system – a world with Paris at its centre, where global power and cultural authority are at stake.¹⁹

White Cotton Shirt, Summer
Wool Jacket, Spring/Summer
1997, Model



Critiquing Wim Wenders's 1989 documentary about Yamamoto, *Notebooks on Cities and Clothes*, in her book on trends in fashion,

Barbara Vinken observed the prevalent portrayal of Yamamoto as a heroic artist 'in the ongoing history of Romanticism', noting 'the return of the aesthetics of genius which has passed into haute couture'.²⁰

Accordingly, curators often present his pieces as a form of high art, overlooking their function as clothing. This classification might also result from Yamamoto's rejection of fashion trends – fundamental to the functioning of the fashion system – as noted above. In 2004, the exhibition *Form Follows Fashion* at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York highlighted the formal qualities of Yamamoto's garments, treating them as abstract works of architecture. Three years later, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco exhibited *Stylized Sculpture: Contemporary Japanese Fashion* from the Kyoto Costume Institute, which studied the clothing of Miyake, Kawakubo, Yamamoto, Watanabe, and Tao Kurihara as sculptures. Here, the photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto also captured the garments' shadows and form through his photographic lens, further stressing their sculptural qualities. His photograph of Yamamoto's wool-felt and knit dress from the autumn/winter 1996 collection, displayed alongside the garment, provides little trace of the body that wears the piece of clothing. These two exhibitions, held in institutions with fundamentally different approaches to objects, both considered Yamamoto as working in a non-fashion design mode.

Several curators have specifically considered Yamamoto's designs within the context of contemporary art. *Uniform: Order and Disorder*, a 2001 exhibition at the MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York, questioned the influence of uniforms and military wear on contemporary fashion, comics, advertising, films and art, examining Yamamoto's clothes alongside the work of 30 other designers and 32 artists. (New York's Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology similarly displayed Yamamoto's garments in 2006 in *Love and War: The Weaponized Woman*, which analysed the influence of lingerie, armour and other military styles on fashion.) This mixing of art forms – a trend of post-modern museology – paralleled the disparate backgrounds of curators Francesco Bonami, Maria Luisa Frisa and Stefano Tonchi, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, a design historian and a fashion journalist, respectively. While never losing sight of the worn garment, viewers were asked to reflect on the many possible meanings of pieces of clothing juxtaposed with objects made for very different purposes.





Curators have also emphasized the conceptual qualities of Yamamoto's clothing. In 2006, his work was again displayed in conjunction with architecture at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in *Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture*, which paired the work of architects, such as Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry, and fashion designers. In this case, however, curator Brooke Hodge explored the shared ideologies of the two disciplines, from their direct relationship with space and the human body to ideas of shelter, identity, creative process and style. Specifically, she considered Yamamoto and Kawakubo's work within the history of deconstruction in fashion, highlighting the cage corset in Yamamoto's black silk crêpe ensemble for the autumn/winter collection of that year. The corset, composed of evenly-placed horizontal strips of fabric, demonstrated the designer's interest in constructing form, as opposed to arriving at an unfinished look through deconstruction.²¹ Thus displayed, Yamamoto's garments challenged viewers to consider clothing in relation to the body in ways that surpassed conventional dressing, as in the *Uniform: Order and Disorder* exhibition at MoMA PS1.

'I want to achieve anti-fashion through fashion.' Yamamoto has said. 'That's why I'm always heading in my own direction, in parallel to fashion. Because if you're not waking what is asleep, you might as well stay on the beaten path.'²²

Yamamoto uprooted and broke clothing conventions and codes, rethinking established ideas of beauty, age, gender and the body. This quest has taken various manifestations against the norm of 1980s sartorial opulence and throughout his career has included a preference for asymmetrical shapes, oversized garments, models of all ages and appearances, gender-ambiguous clothing and reconstructions of historical Western dress.

A 2001 exhibition at the V&A, *Radical Fashion*, is one of several that has highlighted the 'revolutionary' element in Yamamoto's work, situating it in a high-fashion context that also included the work of Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Issey Miyake, Martin Margiela, Comme des Garçons, Junya Watanabe, Azzedine Alaïa, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Vivienne Westwood and Helmut Lang. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Claire Wilcox noted the interest in 'change and renewal' in Yamamoto's garments, illustrated in her display of a wedding dress in mother-of-pearl silk with a hoop skirt from his spring/summer 1999 collection.²³ The model wearing this wedding dress on the runway famously unzipped her hidden pockets to remove slippers, a coat, a hat, gloves and a bouquet, transforming her appearance. While maintaining the traditional white colour, sumptuous material, and long silhouette of conventional Western wedding dresses, Yamamoto's functional version well illustrated his subtly revisionist approach to design.

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In 2006, *Breaking the Mode: Contemporary Fashion from the Permanent Collection* at the Los Angeles County Museum again displayed Yamamoto's work with many of the same names as at the V&A five years earlier. The curators Sharon S. Takeda and Kaye D. Spilker showed a women's two-piece suit in wool gabardine from the autumn/winter 1993 collection in an 'in-progress' state, with what appeared to be faux basting or chalk marks. Also on display was another revision of a tailored suit, composed of trousers and a silk-satin coat with a voluminous lace train from spring/summer 1999. This collection, highlighted in this exhibition and at the 2001 V&A show, was a critical success and notable break from Yamamoto's earlier designs to those referencing haute couture.²⁴ In these two exhibitions, then, it was specifically the ways in which Yamamoto rethought traditional Western fashion that fit curators' definition of radical.

Most recently, curators have chosen to focus on Yamamoto's mastery of couture – an approach that both complements and contradicts his classification as a Japanese designer of avant-garde clothing. Accordingly, *Cut & Construction: The Foundations of Fashion*, a 2005 exhibition at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery, placed Yamamoto in a twentieth-century fashion narrative composed of designers known for their complex and intriguing dressmaking, from established couturiers Cristóbal Balenciaga and Madame Grès to newer names such as Yeohlee and Narciso Rodriguez.

A 2006 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was less concerned with understanding the impressive construction of these garments and focused instead on their 'lives' during one very significant moment: their display on the runway. *Fashion Show: Paris Collections 2006* presented garments from the then-current autumn/winter ready-to-wear collections of Yamamoto, Azzedine Alaïa, Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela, Rochas and Viktor & Rolf and the spring/summer couture collections of Dior, Chanel, Valentino and Christian Lacroix. The gallery was arranged in isolated displays, each dedicated to a designer with mannequins posed on mirrored platforms designed to reflect the look of that particular fashion show: the Chanel mannequins wore the same flat, white go-go boots, the Valentino installation recreated a desert theme with images of sand dunes, and most displays featured the music heard on the runway. Curator Pamela Parmal included videos of the original shows to supplement the garments' static museum display that belied their theatrical role on the runway. She sought to construct a contemporary experience as opposed to one of fashion history where the runway acted as a metaphor for the Paris fashion industry. These New York and Boston exhibitions presented the viewer with two very different aspects of the realm of high fashion.

Yamamoto has frequently refused proposals for retrospectives of his work, notably at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in the late 1980s and the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001.²⁵ He has said:

‘I’m not interested in my own past. Fashion is not that. Fashion is for people of today, this moment’.²⁶

Elsewhere in this publication, Ligaya Salazar gets to the heart of the matter and remarks, in conversation with the designer, that Yamamoto dislikes ‘clothes in museums’.²⁷ In his response, he notes his aversion to presenting his ‘in-progress’ fashion story, or having to define an as yet unfinished body of work.

Furthermore, Yamamoto reminds the reader of the continuous rhythm of fashion creation, where nothing is ever complete – in contrast to much of the renowned permanent collection of the V&A.

It was with this belief in the transient nature of fashion in mind that Yohji Yamamoto and his team shaped *Yohji Yamamoto: May I help you?*, a retrospective of his work held in 2003 at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. Although this show aimed to document 30 years of fashion creation, it was composed of ten garments from recent collections, going back only as far as spring/summer 2000. The main component of the exhibition perhaps added another dimension to the designer’s oeuvre: the display of eight photographers’ fashion photographs, including the work of David Sims, Max Vadukul, Inez Van Lamsweerde & Vinoodh Matadin, Nick Knight, Craig McDean, Sarah Moon, Peter Lindbergh and Paolo Roversi, who collaborated with Yamamoto at various points in his career. This element stemmed from a 2002 exhibition of the same name at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris, which consisted only of the photographs. A defining aspect of Yamamoto’s public image, these photographs underscored the importance of collaboration in his creative production. Each one presented a distinct interpretation of Yamamoto’s designs, alluding to the similar role of exhibition curators in displaying his work.

However, Yamamoto’s singular influence was evident in the display of the garments. Their installation in the museum’s garden invited viewers to treat the clothing as worn articles, subject to the wear and tear of everyday life. This also spoke to the often utilitarian and second-hand aspect of Yamamoto’s clothing, as well as his anti-museum stance.²⁸ Although the installation challenged conventional museum conservation etiquette, it suited the often polemical display of contemporary gallery spaces. While Yamamoto’s choice to hold the exhibition in this environment blurred the boundaries between his oeuvre and contemporary art, it also highlighted two distinct phases in the commercial life of the design, beginning with the fantasy of the advertisement and ending with the reality of the worn garment.

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In 2005, a three-part Yamamoto retrospective examining the designer and his work from multiple perspectives travelled to Florence, Paris and Antwerp, revealing the differences of each space and museum philosophy. Furthermore, these exhibitions more clearly illustrated the fusion of the museum and design worlds and the conflicts of interest that this elicits, notably pertaining to the object's status: as at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art two years earlier, the curators viewed the clothing on display as at once historical, current and consumable. XX, X's title, Olivier Saillard, programming director at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, and Kaat Debo, head curator at the ModeMuseum in Antwerp, curated the show in their respective institutions while Masao Nihei, Yamamoto's long-time fashion show collaborator, designed the exhibitions.

The first of the exhibitions, *Correspondences*, was held at the Galleria d'arte moderna of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, the only venue of the three that was not a costume museum, suggesting that the viewer treat the objects on display not as garments but as works of art. Approximately 100 Yamamoto pieces were interspersed among the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculptures and paintings on display in the museum's 30 rooms. The 'correspondences' of the exhibition's title referred to the different art forms engaged in a dialogue with each other, the interiors and the viewer. The garments were suggestively placed, unprotected by display cases, in relation to the other works (in some cases they were touching). Although the objects were inherently different, the organizers linked them as high art. A dissatisfied Yamamoto remarked upon the heaviness of the clothes next to the other works, clearly intimating he created them to be worn, not displayed in a gallery.²⁹ Indeed, the curator and Yamamoto did not share the same ideas on his fashion story.

In Paris, the Musée de la Mode et du Textile devoted two floors to the exhibition that would be known as *Juste des vêtements*, or Just clothes in its new venue. Here, Saillard was more concerned with Yamamoto's creative process – the first floor simulated his Tokyo studio, including a montage of his sketches and fabrics strewn across the floor, garments in progress, and even the office of the première d'atelier, or head seamstress. Elsewhere, antiques, books and pieces of historic clothing from the museum's archives illustrated Yamamoto's inspiration. On the second floor, Yamamoto's garments were situated in a history of French costume narrative. The curator displayed a selection of designs he considered best represented the designer's development from the early 1980s to the present, 85 per cent of which had also been shown in *Correspondences*, terminating in a final section that juxtaposed Yamamoto's work with that of his sources of influence: French legends of haute couture such as Coco Chanel, Madeleine Vionnet, Madame Grès and Christian Dior. Again, certain garments were not in display cases, allowing visitors to touch them, a first for the museum.

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The final part of the triptych was Dream Shop at the ModeMuseum in Antwerp, the museum's first exhibition dedicated to one designer. Here, visitors revelled in the materiality of Yamamoto's clothes: out of the show's 80 outfits from the late 1980s to the present, they could try on about 20 in a white, dream-like space with neon-lit changing cubicles.³⁰

This interactive experience challenged basic museum and conservation etiquette, and was the first exhibition that evoked Yamamoto's vision of the viewer's direct and 'living' relationship to the garment.³¹

In most cases, the transformation of 'living' garments into 'dead' objects on display distanced them from their original context and from the audience. In Dream Shop, however, viewers perceived the clothes as consumable items, transforming the museum experience into a commercial one. Highlighting publicity and commercial motives, this version of the exhibition more openly engaged the viewer as a consumer than those at the two previous venues.

Conclusion

The perception of Yamamoto's clothing as different from conventional dress, outside of the system of fashion trends and as part of a larger artistic phenomenon, impelled curators to examine it in the museum setting. His work lends itself to more than one narrative and has served as material evidence to several themes. The cage corset ensemble from autumn/winter 2006 displayed in Los Angeles in *Skin + Bones* in 2006 demonstrates this adaptability of Yamamoto's repertoire: used in 2008 in *Gothic: Dark Glamour* at the Museum at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology to evoke the human ribcage, it might also illustrate Yamamoto's revisions of historical clothing or his penchant for oversized and men's clothing on women. His garments' deviation from the fashion industry's norms led to their analysis as art objects, but also as pieces of non-Western or revolutionary clothing. Still, Yamamoto's seat in the eminent Paris fashion union, *Fédération Française de la Couture et du Prêt-à-Porter*, and his frequent quoting of historical Western dress position him in the history of Western costume. These conflicting classifications are further complicated in view of Yamamoto's innovative and impressive dressmaking techniques, whether drawn from Japanese or Western traditions, or both. In any of the narratives, Yamamoto's body of work could trigger questions on the meaning of dress, personal and collective identity, as well as deconstruction and space, for example, appropriate for both historians of art and dress to treat in the museum.



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Yohji Yamamoto works in a medium where there is no unique, original creation or expression of an idea in a single form. Clothes take on one form on the runway model and become something else when sold in stores and worn by consumers. The striking differences in conception and display in the exhibition triptych attempted to address several stages in the lives of Yamamoto's garments, giving viewers a glimpse of the designer's production context and creative process or allowing them to indulge in a tactile experience as the wearer. While these shows demonstrated the influence of the exhibition at Tokyo's Hara Museum in 2003, specifically Yamamoto's aversion to displays of 'old clothes' in museums, the triptych, in many instances, presented the garments on a par with pieces of fine art or costume history. Curators strengthened the established canon of Yamamoto's most noted works, such as his androgynous suits, selections from his spring/summer 1999 collection, and his wedding dress with the bamboo crinoline from autumn/winter 1998. While the garments' transition from consumer goods to museum display objects may be confusing for viewers and consumers, these displays served to fuel the museum dialogue between curator and designer, or history and the industry.

The 2010 exhibition at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, *Histoire Idéale de la Mode Contemporaine*, the first show in a two-part survey of contemporary fashion, attests to this growing discourse in the museum in which the Yamamoto retrospectives participate. Moreover, as contemporary dress studies gain more ground in academia, museums must also serve as a forum for the critical examination of this subject, by nature fleeting and incomplete and whose players continue to dialogue. Yohji Yamamoto at the V&A establishes the significance of the year 1981 in the timeline of fashion history. Yamamoto's arrival in Paris meant many things for the career of the designer, and the wider fashion system. Ligaya Salazar's exploration of the designer from this point of departure contributes to earlier narratives of Japonism, avant-garde dress, design history and now contemporary fashion. These inquiries shall unfold as Yamamoto's work – and his place in museum narratives – continues to evolve.

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