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Yohji Yamamoto Biography

Born in Tokyo in 1943, Yohji Yamamoto was raised in post-war Japan by his mother, a self-employed seamstress and a war widow. Yamamoto's earliest years were spent at a French Jesuit school; then he studied law, graduating from Keio University in 1966, before obtaining a degree from the prestigious Bunkafukuso Gakuin ('Bunka') College of fashion in 1969, when he received two fashion awards, the So-en and the Endo fashion scholarship which took him to Paris. Two years later, in 1972, he launched his women's ready to wear (*prêt à porter*) label 'Y's' and in 1977 he presented his first collection in Tokyo.

Following his success in Japan, Yamamoto presented his women's ready to wear collection in Paris and launched his 'Yohji Yamamoto' label in 1981, followed in 1982 by his first collection in New York. His first menswear collection was shown in Paris in 1984. Along with his experimental 'Yohji Yamamoto' label, he introduced more affordable and wearable lines under the labels 'Y's For Men and 'Y's For Women'. In 2002, he presented his *haute couture* collection in Paris.

Currently the Yohji Yamamoto fashion house has six principal ready to wear lines: Yohji Yamamoto, Yohji Yamamoto pour Homme, Yohji Yamamoto + Noir, Y's and Y's For Men and Y's living which does not have any direct connection to him. His partnership with Adidas, which started with the 2002 women's collection, created the Y-3 label in 2003 and is one of the first and most successful collaborations between a top fashion designer and an activewear manufacturer. In 2006, Yamamoto committed to designing luggage and accessories for Italian luggage specialist Mandarina Duck, under the label Y's Mandarina. His shoe designs for the iconic Doc. Martens brand arrived in 2007 and his 'Coming Soon' label of young upmarket casual wear is due early in 2008. Yamamoto has his own stores in Tokyo, Sapporo, London, Paris and New York as well as many other retail outlets worldwide.

Yamamoto's creative collaborations included a film portrait of himself with Wim Wenders, 'Notebook on Cities and Clothes' (1989), as well as costume designs for Takeshi Kitano's films 'Brother' (2000) and 'Dolls' (2002). He has also created costume designs for the Opéra de Lyon (1990), the Wagner Opera in Bayreuth (1993), the Kanagawa Art Festival Opera (1994) and the Ryuichi Sakamoto Opera (1999). A black belt in karate, Yamamoto is a passionate devotee of rock music which during the first half of the nineties he pursued as a creative complement to his design work, creating a rock music group and recording several albums that were sold in Japan.

Throughout his career, Yamamoto has received various awards, including the Fashion Editors Club (FEC) Award, Tokyo (1982, 1991, 1997); Mainichi Fashion Award (1986, 1994), the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), Master of Design (1999), and the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres (1994), the only Japanese designer to receive this honour, followed by the French National Order of Merit (2005). He was awarded the Japanese Medal of Honour (2004) and an Honorary Royal Designer for Industry from the Royal Society of Arts (2006). 'Yohji Yamamoto Talking to Myself' (with philosopher Kiyokazu Washida), an illustrated notebook that recounts the phases of his life and the objects he creates, was published in 2002, and in the same year photographs of his work by various artists were shown in solo exhibitions at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, and the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. In 2005, his garments were shown in exhibitions at three venues, 'Correspondences' at the Galleria D'Arte Moderna di Palazzo Pitti, Florence, 'Juste des vêtements' at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris and in 2006, 'Dream Shop', at the Mode Museum, MoMu, Antwerp.

Introduction to the Exhibition

Making a garment means thinking about people. I am always eager to meet people and talk to them. It's what I like more than anything else. What are they doing? What are they thinking? How do they lead their lives? And then I can set to work. I start with the fabric, the actual material, the 'feel' of it. I then move on to the form. Possibly what counts most for me is the feel. And then, when I start working on the material, I think my way into the form it ought to assume.
Yohji Yamamoto'.

This exhibition features forty-three woman's wear ensembles from the main collection line, 'Yohji Yamamoto' and sketches the changing aesthetic interests and themes of Yamamoto's work. The garments are presented in free-standing form without showcases so that they can be closely admired, allowing viewers to appreciate their innovative design aesthetic, exquisite craftsmanship and the quality of the materials. Selected from Australian public and private collections, the clothes represent not only the artist's work but more obliquely, its capacity to inspire passionate collecting of his garments in this country.

The garments for this exhibition were chosen to identify and display key features of Yamamoto's designs from the 1980s to the 2000s. These include: his use of black and unusual materials, his emphasis on the creation of new silhouettes, his appropriation of historical Western fashion types, and his revitalisation of traditional Japanese garment forms and fabric techniques.

Yamamoto's elegant design experiments blur the boundaries between *prêt à porter* and *haute couture* fashion.² He has remarked that when he started designing clothes, he knew 'there were two ways: The first is to work with formal classical shapes. The other way is to be very casual. That's what I decided on, but I wanted a new kind of casual sportswear that could have the same status as formal clothing.'³

In the early eighties, Yamamoto was one of three Japanese designers (along with Rei Kawakubo's 'Comme des Garçons' and Issey Miyake) whose inventive creations revolutionised the prevailing Western fashion for women, with its structured figure-hugging clothing (like the power suit) that sexualised the female body. In contrast to this norm, Yamamoto's garments draped and enveloped the female body with fabric, ignoring its usual accentuation points and shifting attention to the back, or other parts of the body. This changed both the fashion silhouette and the body/clothing relationship. By basing elegant women's fashion on his deconstruction of men's clothing, Yamamoto plays out in his garments ideas about the perceived competing masculine and feminine sides of women. As he has remarked: 'In my philosophy, the word androgyny doesn't have any meaning. I think there is no difference between men and women. We are different in body but sense, spirit and soul are the same.'⁴

Yamamoto is characterised as having an 'anti-fashion' approach to contemporary fashion by creating sculpted, asymmetrical, often oversized shapes that are layered and starkly monochromatic, usually black. His influences are varied but constant, from traditional indigenous Japanese clothing, the early twentieth century portrait photographs of August Sander who chronicled types of German rural workers in their everyday clothes, as well as historical Western fashion types, uniforms and industrial work wear – in other words, clothes that are functional. He sees his original 'look' emerging from punk⁵ but it was also based on the *kimono* and his desire 'to give the *kimono* shape a new energy.'⁶

Known for their monastic, utilitarian elegance, yet sexy at the same time, his early garments were devoid of decoration or artifice, relying solely on the fabric's character and featured odd, irregular details like uneven hems and collars, hems with zips, cut-outs, pockets or flaps. Labels inside were inscribed: 'There is nothing so boring as a neat and tidy look'.⁷ Yamamoto's garments seemed to distill the traditional Japanese design philosophy that values the asymmetry and irregularities of nature over the artificial.⁸ He thinks 'perfection is ugly,' and symmetry 'not sufficiently human' and wants to see 'scars, failure, disorder, distortion' in the things people make.⁹ In the later eighties, Yamamoto's clothing designs evolved into a more structured and fitted silhouette outstanding for their cut, craftsmanship and material innovation. His collections of the nineties onwards display a more Westernised fashion aesthetic and his ongoing romantic references to historical French couture styles from the *Belle Epoque* bustle to classic fifties' Dior.

Yamamoto's designs are insistently monochromatic with particular emphasis on black, the colour of shadows, the colour of *Bunraku* theatre performers, such that he has been dubbed 'the poet of black'.¹⁰ Off-white or colours such as red, purple, cerise, brown and dark blue make an occasional appearance throughout his oeuvre

but black is the preferred canvas for his creations. He favours black fabric because he dislikes having unnecessary meaning or emotion imposed on the clothes, describing black as 'modest and arrogant at the same time.' 'Black is lazy and easy – but mysterious. It means that many things go together, yet it takes different aspects in many fabrics. You need black to have a silhouette. Black can swallow light, or make things look sharp. But above all black says this: 'I don't bother you – don't bother me!'"¹¹.

The selected garments here also explore Yamamoto's commitment to the design aesthetic of creating new silhouettes through his sculptural interrogation of form and material. Yamamoto's craftsmanship and cutting techniques allow him to fabricate shapes and forms that naturally change with the figure's contours and movement. Best of all, this means his clothes are easy and comfortable to wear; they are habitable for the body. Yamamoto's attention to the feminine form is rhapsodic and he believes 'the essence of a woman is in her joints'.¹² His designs tend to push the boundaries of cutting and cut-outs to the limits of the technique and suggest his affinity with such modernist couturiers as Pierre Cardin or André Courrèges. He rarely cuts close to the figure, probing the space between the body and clothing and using it as an integral part of his designs. In Yamamoto's design philosophy, there should always be some interaction between the body, the wearer and the essential spirit of the designer.¹³ He has always focused his attention on 'the design of human physical presence' and believes you can get a sense of the person, just by looking at their clothes.¹⁴

Yamamoto's interest in the evolution and history of fibre technology inspires his experiments with new fabrics as well as with international clothing textiles, such as Thai and African fabrics for his Spring-Summer 1993 collection, or his 'Eskimo' Autumn-Winter collection of 2000–2001 with its fur-lined clothing and suede wedding gowns. His garment designs have always emphasised the importance of the raw materials he uses and they allow him to explore opposing tones and textures in his work, such as denim with jersey knit. While often engaging with new fabrics, Yamamoto also uses natural materials, including linen, felt, muslin, classic hound's tooth and Herringbone woollen fabrics or the humble wool gaberdine.

Since the early nineties, Yamamoto has emulated the traditions and techniques of French *haute couture* and Western fashion. The exhibition represents his assimilation of such design types as the Yves Saint Laurent's tuxedo suit, Coco Chanel's little black dress as well as Jean-Paul Gaultier's bustier of the eighties. His Spring-Summer 2003 line, for example, which opened the Paris *haute couture* collections in July 2002, made subtle references to such designers as Elsa Schiaparelli with his cloth cadet caps and Christian Dior with dresses featuring small shoulders and full skirts. His Spring-Summer 2004 show with its threaded fabric through buckles and sparkling fastenings prompted memories of Paco Rabanne's riveted dresses of the sixties.

Yamamoto's ability to combine traditional Japanese garment influences, such as the *kimono* and the *obi*, with modernist ready-to-wear Western fashion, results in garments that are classical but sensual and alluring. While refuting any Japanese influence and bored 'with ordinary Occidental fabrics', Yamamoto, for his Spring-Summer 1995 collection, used an ancient Japanese art of dying fabric to turn *kimono*-inspired dresses into exotic flowing gowns. Small bunched pieces of the fabric are bound with tiny threads during dying; when the thread is removed a little knob of peaked fabric remains, along with tiny explosions of the undyed shade. The collection was described as 'pure poetry', 'what fashion should be, something that makes you dream.'¹⁵

Yamamoto's approach to fashion has been described as 'quasi-religious', 'post-modernist' and 'philosophical'. Despite these high-sounding terms, Yamamoto's whimsical sense of humour is also evident in many of his garment creations: for instance, his Spring-Summer 1999 show with sculpted, elongated reinterpretations of hooped Victorian crinolines, or his Spring-Summer 2001 'le Sac' collection with dresses that incorporated waist handbags, or his exploration in the Spring-Summer 2006 show of the 'soft bondage' theme with dresses featuring long silken ropes, some with leather thongs, wrapped around the bare back and neck.

While his vision and garments are uncompromising, Yamamoto sees himself as 'not simply working for fashion. I am searching for beauty and trying to touch history with clothes. I believe strongly in what I am doing because I am sincere in my fascination with women's beauty.'¹⁶ It is perhaps because of this that Yamamoto's garments resonate so strongly, arousing devotion to his vision amongst his global client community, such that the artist's work has entered our popular cultural canon.

Notes

- Yohji Yamamoto, quoted by Francois Baudot, *Fashion Memoir: Yohji Yamamoto*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1997, p. 11
- Suzy Menkes, 'Yohji Yamamoto: geisha to geometric', *International Herald Tribune*, July 8, 2003.
- Yohji Yamamoto, quoted by John Duka, 'Yohji Yamamoto defines his fashion fashion (sic) philosophy', *New York Times*, October 23, 1983.
- Yohji Yamamoto, *Yohji Yamamoto, An exhibition triptych*, 'Correspondences,' Florence, 'Juste des Vetéments,' Paris, 'Dream Shop,' Antwerp, Sarl, 2006, p. 32.
- Suzy Menkes, 'Fashion's Poet of Black: Yamamoto', *International Herald Tribune*, September 5, 2000
- Yohji Yamamoto, quoted by John Duka, 'Yohji Yamamoto defines his fashion fashion (sic) philosophy', op. cit.
- Cf. Louise Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, 2005, p. 103.
- Jonathon M. Woodham, *A Dictionary of Modern Design*, Oxford University Press, 2006. <http://.answers.com./topic/yohji-yamamoto>
- Yohji Yamamoto, *Yohji Yamamoto, Talking to Myself*, (interviews with Yohji Yamamoto by Kiyokazu Washida), edited by Carla Sozzani, -Steidl/Carla Sozzani, Tokyo, 2002, 'Freedom or the Vain' section. (unpaginated).
- Suzy Menkes, 'Fashion's Poet of Black: Yamamoto', op.cit.
- ibid.
- Yohji Yamamoto, *Yohji Yamamoto, Talking to Myself*, op.cit. 'May I help you' section.
- Cf. Jonathon M. Woodham, *A Dictionary of Modern Design*, op.cit.
- Yohji Yamamoto, *Yohji Yamamoto, Talking to Myself*, op.cit. 'Fashion or The Gaze at the Past' and 'Intermezzo 1' sections.
- Carla Sozzani quoted by Amy M Spindler, 'Review/Fashion; Back to the Future: An Elegant Edge', *New York Times*, October 12, 1994
- Yohji Yamamoto, *Yohji Yamamoto, An Exhibition Triptych*, op.cit. p.22

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Yohji Yamamoto Garments in Australian Collections

Director's Foreword

'Radical Elegance – Yohji Yamamoto Garments in Australian Collections' is the first solo exhibition of women's clothing by the renowned Japanese couturier, Yohji Yamamoto in Australia. It is also the first project of the Art Gallery of Western Australia's Artist in Focus Asia series. The exhibition traces the changing aesthetic interests and themes of his work over a twenty-year period. Featuring over forty garment ensembles, it draws on Australian private collections and the public collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Powerhouse Museum.

The Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the lenders, both private individuals and public institutions to this exhibition, as well as the work of the two curatorial advisers, Mineko Carlini and Marit Kloostra, whose fashion expertise has been so important in the exhibition's development. I would also like to thank Jenepher Duncan, Curator of Contemporary Art, for her curatorial management of the exhibition.

The Art Gallery of Western Australia warmly acknowledges the generosity of the Principal Exhibition Partner, Ernst & Young for their support of 'Radical Elegance – Yohji Yamamoto Garments in Australian Collections', and the Gordon Darling Foundation for their on-going support of the Gallery and in particular its series, Artist in Focus - Asia.

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