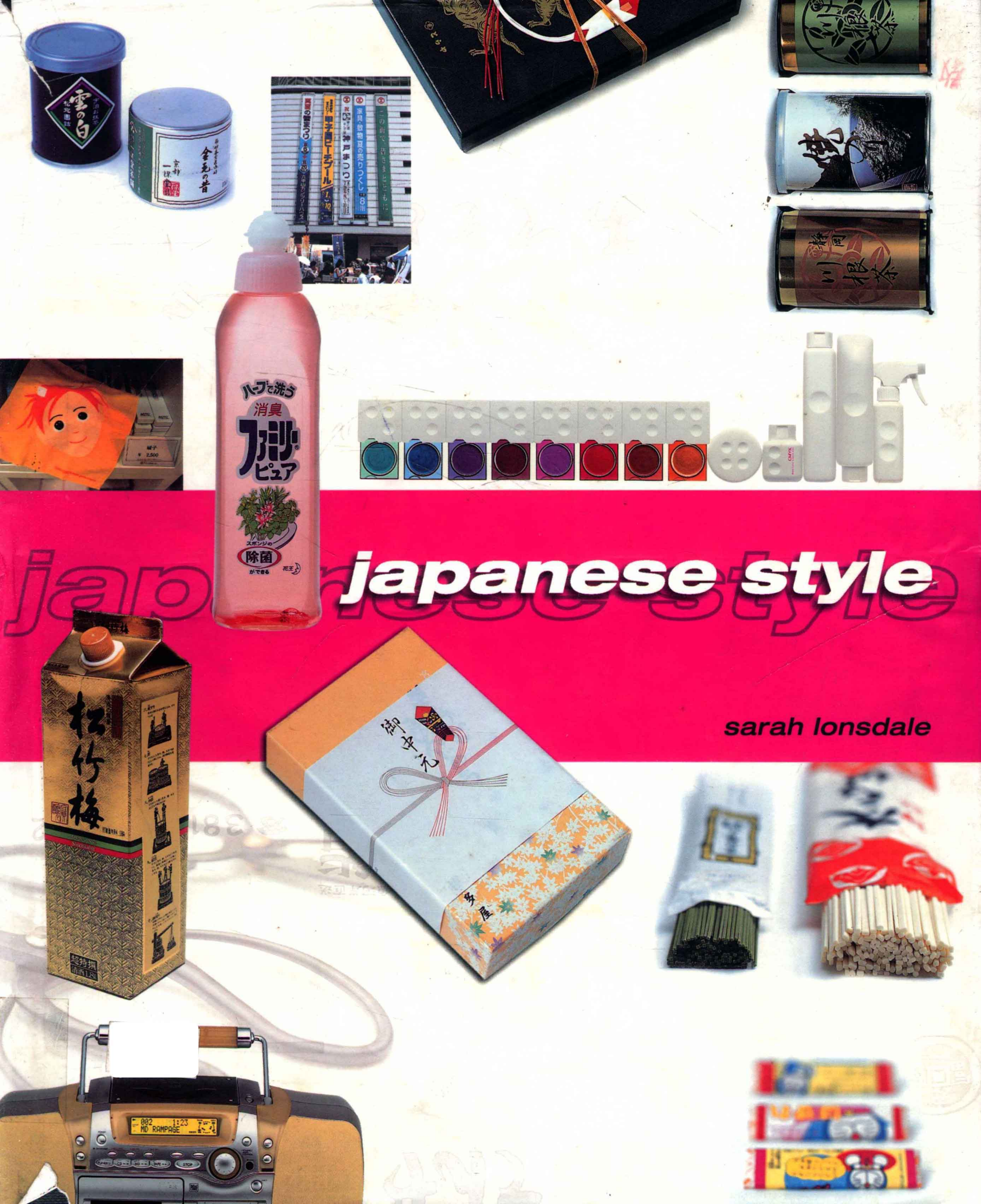
japanese style

sarah lonsdale



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Executive Editor: Sarah Larter
Project Art Direction: Diane Spender
Design: Sue Michniewicz
Picture Research: Julia Ruxton/Alex Pepper
Production: Janette Davis
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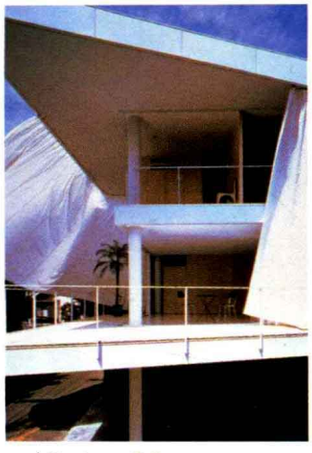

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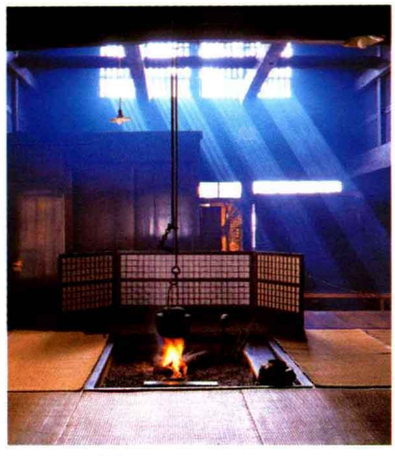

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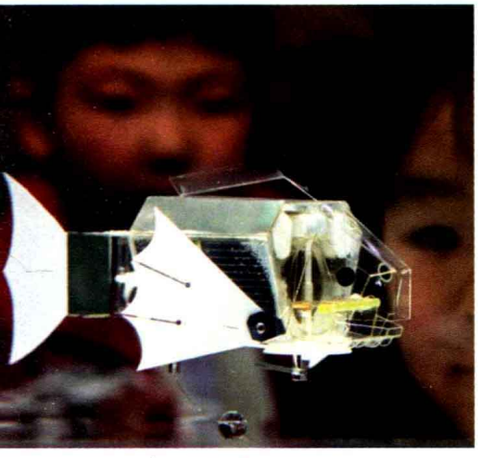

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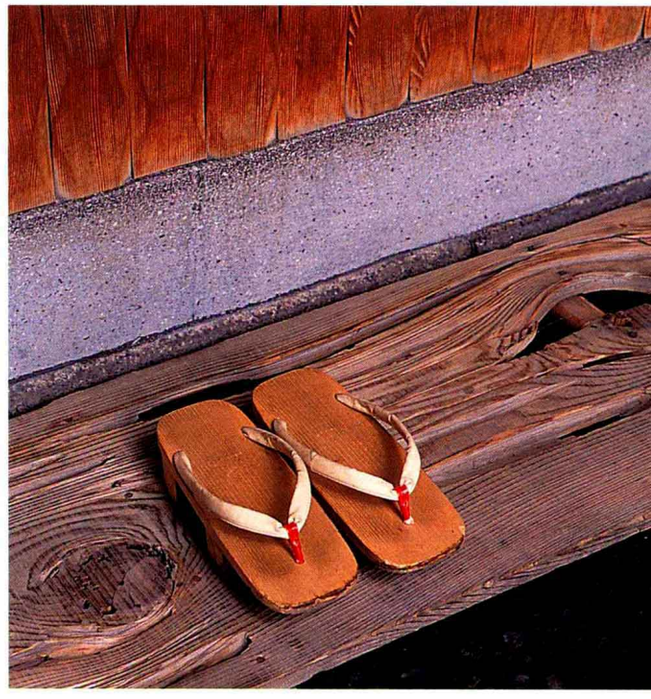

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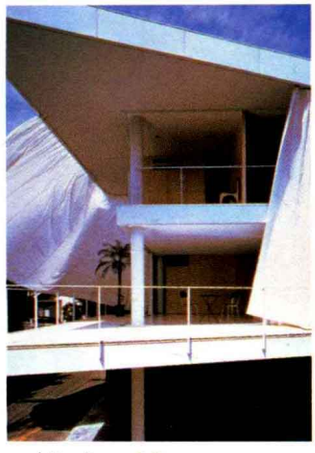

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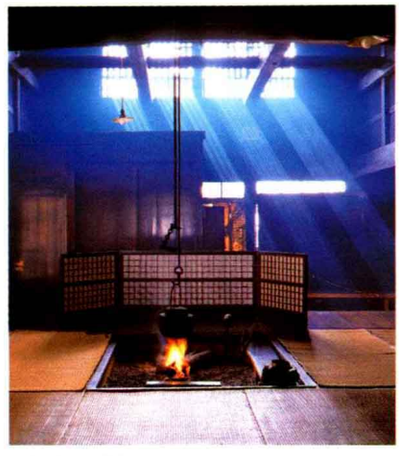

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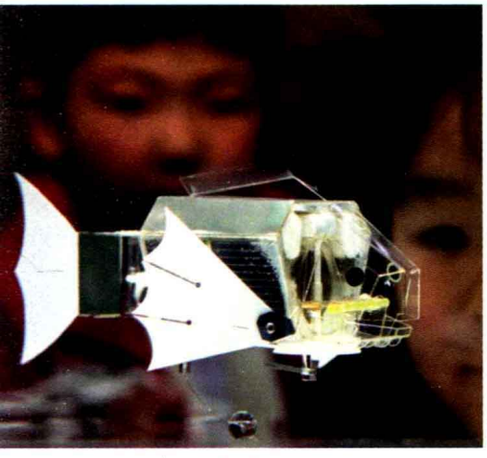

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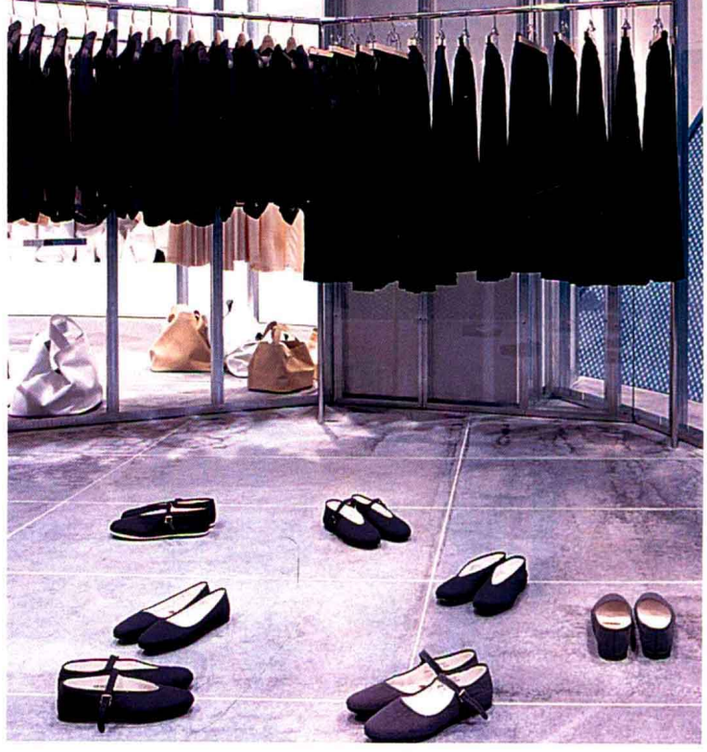
introduction

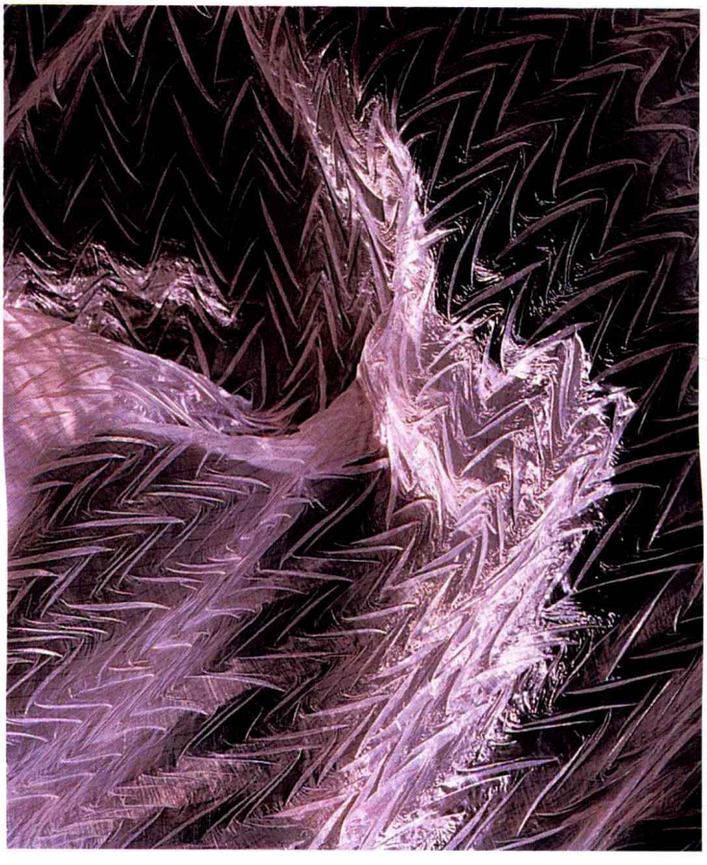
Japan is a land saturated in juxtaposition, where the traditional world continually meets and melds with the modern. This long history of simultaneously adapting and distinguishing the native from the Western is a markedly singular Japanese trait. From the rice farmer in a Ferrari to young Japanese girls flocking to Harlem for gospel lessons, this fascinating contrast is also clearly manifested in a number of areas of Japanese design: fashion, architecture, interiors, food and drink, homeware, transport, products, advertising and communication and packaging.

Ever since Japan opened its shores to the outside world in the Meiji era in 1868, after almost 250 years of self-imposed isolation, it raced to catch up with the West. Modernization was synonymous with Westernization and the country grew at a remarkable rate finally culminating with the bubble years of the 1980s, which marked Japan's position as the world's second wealthiest nation.

Conspicuous consumption abounded and the Japanese travelled overseas at an unprecedented pace desperate to absorb all things foreign. The country's new-found wealth resulted in garish excesses. People dressed head-to-toe in designer brands, gold leaf was sprinkled liberally in sake cups and bowls of miso, while ice was flown in from exotic foreign locales to chill the *mizu-wari* (whisky and water) of Ginza's more fashionable nightclubs. By the early 1990s the bubble had burst and the country headed into a decade-long recession marred by industrial decline; the old Japan which had driven the country to riches was now suffering from financial woes. The country was also hit by a series of disasters including the sarin gas attack by a religious cult, the Kobe earthquake, and a nuclear accident. The days where the Japanese had felt invincible and secure had all but disappeared.

These disasters prompted the Japanese to question their values giving way to a maturity and self-awareness: the country was finally coming of age. Today, much of the framework that at one time defined Japan's social structure is in a state of flux. Companies can no longer guarantee lifetime employment and *giri* (a sense of obligation and indebtedness), which was once the backbone of the country's social cohesion is waning. In its place a new economy has emerged, one that is driven primarily by cost consciousness. Middlemen are suddenly finding themselves cut out of the picture as companies find more efficient ways of doing business. More and more young people are choosing to work part-time, while others are shunning large corporations and going into business by themselves. Younger women who may pay huge amounts for a designer bag are just as likely to bargain hunt for their clothes. Young designers are discovering clever ways to work with limited materials and although their work may be a little less professional they offer a greater variety of goods with wider appeal. Even Toyota, one of Japan's more established corporations has had to adapt to cater to the new youth market. In an unprecedented move for a corporation accustomed to consensus building, the company gave free reign to one of its young designers to develop a car with more youth appeal. Although the younger generation live an overtly Western lifestyle, sleeping in beds rather than futons, shopping at the Gap, and sipping café lattes from Starbucks, they have also rediscovered aspects of their own culture which is leading to a quiet Japanese renaissance. While at one time Western items were adopted and given a Japanese flavour, these days in a reverse trend traditional items from the past are taken and given a contemporary twist. For example the *yukata*, a cotton kimono worn to summer festivals and firework displays, has made a comeback over the past few years. Traditional





designs are now being worn coupled with more contemporary ones, and even fashion designers have started selling yukata in their trendy stores along side their t-shirts. Traditional wooden *geta* are still being worn on the feet with yukata though many choose to wear anything from platforms to flip-flops. Following a trend to hoist the yukata up at the waist like a mini skirt, the mini knee-length yukata made its debut. These days a yukata is just as likely to be seen in a nightclub as it is at a summer festival. Okura, a small store in Tokyo's trendy Daikanyama district, makes a hip line of indigo-coloured clothing inspired by Japanese workwear. They also sell denim kimonos, Gucci style bags in kimono fabrics and traditional *tabi* socks in metallic colours.

This renaissance is not solely confined to fashion. After years of knocking down *minka* (traditional rural houses) and replacing them with prefabricated modern housing, there is a new movement afoot to preserve this traditional architecture. In doing so, certain modifications are being made to accommodate modern conveniences, such as winter heating for the clay floor, yet maintaining the architectural integrity and organic feel of these homes. In the meantime, there is an emerging trend in the building of new homes to shun the use of plywood and incorporate more natural elements into the home, in particular returning to pure wood for floors and interior frames. The synthetic materials commonplace in prefabricated homes have indeed proved to be a poor substitute for the natural materials of past. Japan's traditional arts and crafts have survived through the handing down of highly refined skills from generation to generation. As modern substitutes have replaced many of these arts and crafts their perpetuation has been endangered. The young who have chosen to enter this laborious world have begun to realize that their survival depends not only on the continuation of their craft but also on finding ways in which these traditions and skills can become more relevant to contemporary culture without compromising aesthetic standards. Today much of what is considered traditionally Japanese at one time had its roots in another culture. A history of assimilation has created a cosmopolitan environment rich with foreign influence. The younger generation is able to use this international experience as means to inform their own culture, both adapting and preserving what is quintessentially Japanese, while making it more appropriate for contemporary living.

fashion

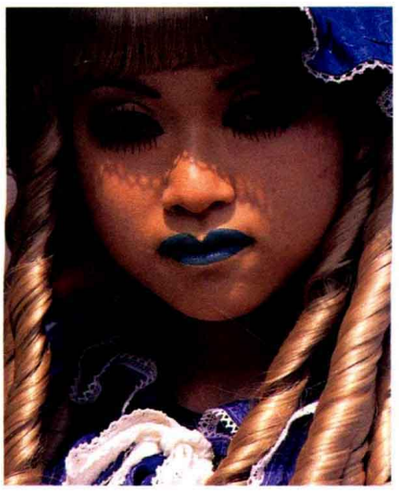
The Japanese are fastidious followers of fashion, picking up trends and adapting them overnight. While Japan looks to the West for inspiration, Tokyo has become the fashion mecca for the rest of Asia, its youth desperate to copy the young Japanese female population tottering around in their *atsuzoku* (thick-soled shoes) sporting dyed blonde hair. Once a nation of neat dressers with uniformly tidy black hair, Tokyo is awash with a new generation of style mavens with colourful hairdos.

The "social parasites", those who live off their parents and spend their income solely on themselves, dress head to toe in foreign designer brands, toting Louis Vuitton and Prada bags. In a tribute to cuteness, young girls dress only in pink. Men perm their hair in an effort to emulate popular soccer stars, and high school girls in their navy uniforms wear baggy white socks as a fashion statement.

Yofuku, literally "Western clothing", is a somewhat obsolete term as it covers most clothing manufactured and worn in Japan today. The word first came into use in the latter half of the nineteenth century when Western clothes were adopted by the Japanese. *Kimono* meaning "thing to wear", was also introduced at this time as a collective term to describe native clothing. The wearing of yofuku, particularly by men, proved better suited to the Western-style office furnishings being adopted in the workplace. For women Western clothing was a form of liberation as all the subtle nuances, such as marital and social status, that were revealed when wearing a kimono were largely absent in Western clothes.

Although many women own a kimono, there are relatively few occasions when they are worn. The coming of age ceremony when women turn twenty is when most don a *furisode*, a long-sleeved kimono, indicating their unmarried status. Traditional Shinto weddings provide another occasion where the bride is required to wear a traditional white kimono and a heavy black wig; this is also one of the few times when a man may wear a kimono. The majority of young couples these days, however, prefer the setting of a church or a hotel where a wedding gown is the most common form of dress.

In the early 1980s, Japanese fashion designers began to make a name for themselves in the West. Issey Miyake was the first to come to the notice of the Western fashion press, followed shortly by Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto. The showing of their abstract, highly textural, monochromatic clothing caused a sensation and succeeded in challenging the very essence



of the Western concept of fashion. Although this fashion triumvirate seems to shun the title of Japanese designer, their cultural background has enabled them to be free from the philosophy and confines of a traditional Western perception of clothing. Indeed familiar Japanese themes resonate subconsciously throughout their work. In particular, a reverence for materials is displayed by these designers in their selection, treatment and manipulation of fabric. Unlike the West where a fabric is tailored to the body, these designers let the cloth dictate the cut and fall of a piece of clothing, acknowledging the space between the body and the cloth and designing pieces that combine both functionality with beauty.

As the name, "Like the Boys" suggests Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons brought black, androgynous clothing into vogue. Although in recent years she has retreated from the use of black, her conceptual designs still feature trademark *trompe-l'oeil* buttons and lapels, asymmetrical hems, frayed edges, wrapped layers, visible stitching and oversize ruffles. Her cerebral, deconstructionist approach to clothing continues to challenge the traditional concept of the female figure and her line of humped clothing has been her most progressive statement on the female condition to date, quite radical in its conception.

While Yohji Yamamoto is also renowned for asymmetrical, deconstructionist design, he manages to incorporate a level of softness, imbuing femininity into his clothing without pandering to stereotypical notions of beauty. His baggy cuts, misshapen lines, ragged hems, and tailored waists all share the same simple fluidity of form. Like the multi-layered Heian kimono, his clothes often hint at more than is immediately visible such as a different fabric at the back of a skirt, a hidden pocket, or a dress that may be zipped off to reveal further layers underneath. Like his contemporaries, Yamamoto's clothing is both multi-functional and timeless, transcending the temporal much like the kimono being worn for both night and day.

Issey Miyake has proved himself to be the ultimate pioneer in combining traditional textiles with futuristic fabrics. His early works integrate everyday Japanese materials – cotton, hemp and quilting – into contemporary design. In his "Pleats" collection however, Miyake revolutionized a traditional method of pleating by reversing the process, first cutting and sewing the fabric into shape then pleating it by machine afterwards. This reverse approach allows a material to permanently maintain its pleated or crumpled form regardless. Two-dimensional like the kimono; the "Pleats" line takes on new sculptural dimensions when worn. Miyake's continual pursuit of utilitarian beauty culminated with the "A-POC" line, his most democratic clothing to date. Though grounded in his Japanese heritage, Issey Miyake has succeeded in transcending cultural borders with his designs attaining that rare status of designer who is truly universal.

The only other Japanese designer of late to have challenged the legacy of Japan's fashion triumvirate, is the relative newcomer, Junya Watanabe, protégé of Rei Kawakubo. Colourful and conceptual, his clothing is still in a burgeoning state but his designs promise to continue a Japanese fashion legacy that constantly challenges our perceptions of clothing.