

Asian Invasion: The Rise of Asian Male Designers

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Abstract

Kenzo, Issey Miyake, and Yohji Yamamoto. The early 1970's brought about the beginnings of the first 'Asian invasion' of the fashion world and by the 1980's these names were wildly popular. Though they've remained highly renowned, during the 1990's eyes shifted toward the up-and-coming American designers like Marc Jacobs and Michael Kors. What happened to the surge of Asian designers from then until present day? For some reason, they are on the rise again. The designs of Peter Som, Phillip Lim, and Derek Lam among others are becoming fashion staples and the epitome of simple yet extremely modern fashion. This paper will discuss how the first Asian designers broke through in the Paris fashion world, the new Asian designers that are on the rise today, their differences, and how both generations of the 'Asian invasion' are making their mark in the fashion society.

The Beginning

Paris is and has been known as one of the fashion capitals of the world since approximately the seventeenth century, the reign of Louis XIV. He created the idea of using fashion and taste to show off French luxury, wealth, and power. Beginning in 1889 with the establishment of Jeanne Lanvin, many French designers soon emerged and were highly successful. Just in the early twentieth century alone, this includes Chanel, Pierre Balmain, Celine, Christian Dior, and Givenchy in the luxury market. Paris as the fashion capital laid down the foundation for the modern fashion system (Kawamura 55).

So why and how did Asian designers break in to such a foreign and greatly established fashion world? Actually, Asian influence in France and fashion in general came long before the appearance of Asian designers. In 1854, Japan's doors opened to the rest of the world after two hundred years of isolation. Trade agreements allowed Japan to gain status in both interior design and fashion. This trend was called "Japonisme" and as Kawamura states, "the Japanese influence has partially redrawn the boundaries of fashion away from 'western' ideals of the body, body-space relations and conventions of clothing..." (93). By the 1900's, designers like Coco Chanel and Paul Poiret were using Asian influences in their designs. Chrysanthemums, exotic fabrics and kimono-inspired clothing were a hit as well as the western interpretation of Asian ideas in clothing. Eastern influences

remained prominent through out the First World War so that when Kenzo emerged on the Parisian scene in 1970, he was well accepted.

The First Designers

Kenzo Takada was born in Kyoto, Japan in 1940. He is the first designer to pave the road for fellow Japanese designers. His began by selling his designs to Louis Feruad as well as by designing freelance collections. He finally opened his own shop in 1970 called Jungle Jap. When comparing Kenzo's designs to those of his inspirations (Chanel, Vionnet and Balenciaga), McDowell says, "...his work has none of the classicism of the first two or the baroque splendor of the latter. However, it does have in common with them all the simplicity and purity of design which is the *sine qua non* of good design" (183). His designs are considered to be wearable (since the other designers were much more abstract and avant-garde) and young. His first collection made him an instant "name" in the industry. Even though the collection was made in cotton due to financial issues, he made a huge impact with his very contemporary knitwear.

Shortly later in 1970, Issey Miyake (born in Hiroshima, Japan in 1935) formed the Miyake Design Studio and Issey Miyake International in Tokyo. Previous to that, he worked as assistant designer at Guy Laroche, Givenchy and, later, Geoffrey Beene. However, unlike Kenzo, Miyake's first collection was shown in New York and Tokyo. Two years later, he showed in Paris and remains showing there to this day. Issey Miyake's claim is that he's "taking the spirit behind the kimono' in all his work" (McDowell's 206). Miyake's designs are geared more towards baggier looks and are the mastery of proportion and color. Miyake brought with him new technologies and tools for putting pieces together as seen in his "Pleats Please" collection. Traditionally, pleats are pressed before a garment is cut but he did it the other way around. Miyake is also known for his "A Piece of Cloth" clothing which was exactly that...an entire outfit made from one piece of cloth.

Yohji Yamamoto (born in Japan, 1943) began his career in 1972 with his own company and showed his first collection in Tokyo in 1976. His designs were considered part of the "new" dressing style. His designs, much like Miyake's, wrapped and disguised the woman's body. "For me, a woman in Yohji is like a nymphomaniac nun. His clothes are at once sensual and very ritualistic" (Menkes). He also had an interesting take on his designs that set him apart from the other designers, both Japanese and western. Anne Stegemeyer, author of *Who's Who in Fashion*, states "He likes surprise details: an unexpected pocket, a lapel that turns into a long shawl, a new placement of buttons" (260).

Change in Views

Eventually, with the surge of these designers and their use of new technology and tools, their ethnicity became the main focus of the collections. The common denominator for Kenzo, Miyake, and Yamamoto was the use of Japanese influence in their designs. However, not all the Japanese designers were happy with being classified as just another Japanese designer. “Yamamoto says: ‘I am not a Japanese creator but just a creator’. Miyake shares the same view and remarks: ‘I don’t want to express Japanese culture. I’ve always wanted to be between cultures...’” (Kawamura 96).

Perhaps in an attempt to take attention away from their ethnicities by showing the world their individuality, the Japanese designers got what they wished for. After the Japanese pandemonium died down some, acceptance of other foreign designers in Paris became more common. A group of Belgian designers such as Martin Margiela (1988), Dries Van Noten (1991), and Ann Demeulemeester (1992) became successful. Also, across seas in the United States, Michael Kors and Marc Jacobs were experiencing major success. Suddenly, all of the attention shifted to simpler designs and more functional, casual clothing. Though the Japanese designers remained among the top designers in the world, their names were no longer mentioned as often.

The Next Generation

The writer of a recent article in Asia Arts journal, Victoria Chin, had this to say about upcoming Asian designers:

Ralph what? Donna who? Move over Marc Jacobs, because the next generation of high-end designers may be dominated by names such as Peter Som, Derek Lam...The winds of change are coming from the East, and these young Asian designers will change the way you dress. Forever. (Chin)

Due to the intense focus on designers from New York at New York’s Spring 2005 Fashion Week, many were surprised when a few Asian designers stole the show. Then, it was noted that three of the ten designers nominated for the CFDA Fashion Fund award were Asian. These new Asian designers were not just from Japan either. They were of Asian descent but they were born...Americans. This was a complete change from the first wave of Asian designers. Possibly their American upbringing is the reason why these designers do not design using traditional Asian elements. It is thought that Peter Som began this movement but the truth is that this new wave of Asian designers in the 21st century really began in 1983.

In an article about designer David Chu, the writer states, “It all started with six designs for men’s outerwear in 1983. After a decade, it became a fashion empire” (Davis). This article refers to the designer of the Nautica line whom many don’t know is, in fact, Asian.

David Chu was originally from Taiwan but moved to New York to be an architect. When Chu took summer drawing classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology, he landed in fashion. David Chu's designs for Nautica have continuously experimented with detail and fabric treatments and have continued to have great.

Peter Som, a San Francisco native, was the first of the well-known Asian Americans on the scene. His career began with his 2001 collection. His designs were then featured on the hit show *Sex and the City* and since then he has become extremely popular among celebrities and socialites. His designs are said to be reflective of his upbringing as the son of two architects from Hong Kong. As Chin states, "you certainly won't see dragons splashed across the clothes, but you will notice the clean, traditional lines and vibrant sense of color."

Next to appear was Derek Lam one year later. Although his own collection did not debut until 2002, he began his career 12 years prior to that at Michael Kors. His designs definitely reflect Kors' precise and sharp American sportswear. The look of his collections are classified as "Pretty, girly fabrics backed by clean, crisp silhouettes". In following years, Lam won the Ecco Domani Fashion Foundation Award for new designer (2004) and the CFDA Perry Ellis Swarovski Award for new designer (2005).

Lastly, and fairly new to the scene, is Orange County, California native Phillip Lim. He began as a design assistant at Katayone Adeli. Lim's collection launched in 2004 and he named it "3.1 Phillip Lim" since he was 31 years old when this happened. Similar to the other Asian American designers of this generation, his designs are a refined, laid-back take on American sportswear.

Conclusion

The first generation of Asian designers set the bar for the Asian designers of today. Their individuality, avant-garde designs and innovative and technological advances set them apart from typical fashion and were well accepted in Paris, the city of fashion. Since these designers hailed from Asia, they used their Asian background as elements in their designs but did not want that to be the sole focus of their collections. This has since changed greatly mainly because the Asians that have immigrated to America did so a generation ago and have since raise their children here and so on. Many of the new Asian designers are, in fact, American natives which explains why they've had their big break in the U.S. as opposed to Europe. The new Asian designers began their careers in the 1990s working for the major American designers that focused on more casual wear and eventually conveyed these ideas in their own designs. They fully portray the idea of classic American sportswear and no longer use their ethnicity a 'backdrop' for their designs.

Asian male designers never really left the fashion scene. They reached their peak in the mid 1970's and early 1980's and even though the public latched onto American sportswear in the 1990's, these designers continue to succeed. The first designers made their mark by embracing their ethnicity in style and aesthetics while the new designers are more or less assimilating American style while maintaining Asian precision and cuts. The fashion world always has and probably always will appreciate the clean-cut, modern, fashion-forward, and of course "woman-friendly" aesthetic of clothing that Asian male designers have given us.

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