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Martin Margiela and the Japanese Designers: An Exploration of Cultural Exchange Through Fashion

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by

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Dedicated to my mother

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INTRODUCTION

It was October 23rd, 1988, at the Café de la Gare, a Parisian nightclub, that Maison Margiela held its first runway show, Spring/Summer 1989. The invitations had been sent through telegram delivery. Stepping into the club that night, the guests were greeted by live audio of the sounds backstage. A simple piece of white cotton cloth was laid down on the stage and weaving up into the seats, serving as a runway. The models stepped out to the music of Iggy Pop, the Rolling Stones, and the Velvet Underground wearing what would soon come to be known as Margiela's most iconic look-- the Tabi boot. The split shape of the shoe shocked the audience, and in order to create an even more dramatic effect, Margiela had painted the soles of all the models' shoes with red paint so that tracks of the cloven imprints were left on the white cotton runway.[1]

Margiela was not the inventor of this split-toed style, however. The boot was modelled after the traditional Japanese sock (Fig 1), the tabi sock from which it takes its name. The sock dates back to the 15th century and is made from three pieces of material; one is used as the sole, while the other two make up the top, joined by a seam sewn from the top of the ankle to the split between the big toe and the second. Clasps hold the back together so one could undo them in order to more easily put them on. Nothing about this design was altered by Margiela, save for the fact that he manufactured them from leather and placed them on an eighty-millimeter round wedge heel (Fig 2). Yet to this day Margiela has eluded criticism for his aesthetically Japanese boot.

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[1] Samson, Alexandre, Olivier Saillard, Denise Raab Jacobs, Liza Tripp, and Martin Margiela. *Martin Margiela: the Women's Collections 1989-2009*. New York, NY: Rizzoli Electa, 2018. 3.

Fig. 1, Traditional Japanese tabi socks

Fig. 2, Maison Margiela, Tabi boot, Spring/Summer 2020

Nobody seemed to know who the man behind this daring new brand was. Over his twenty-one-year long career as the creative director of Maison Margiela, Martin Margiela remained completely anonymous. He would never step out onto the runway after his shows or give interviews on his collections. Paparazzi could never get a photograph of him as nobody knew who to look for. Margiela was the opposite of the celebrity designers we recognize today such as Tom Ford and Karl Lagerfeld, two designers well known for their eccentric, and somewhat over the top, personalities. Yet this anonymity began to create a sense of mystery around the entire brand that intrigued the members of the fashion community. Rumors began to spread about the elusive designer. Some were convinced that Margiela's in-house PR, Patrick, was Margiela himself; fashion insiders, claiming to have met him, reported that he looked like Jesus; Vogue one time theorized that he was in fact a woman; and some believed he didn't exist at all.[2]

This anonymity of Margiela is not unlike Rei Kawakubo, Margiela's predecessor and someone he took much of his inspiration from, and her aversion towards the media. Kawakubo was famous for being the opposite of what everyone desired a celebrity designer to be– she was not one to foster ostentatious celebrity friendships or one to appear in the tabloids for any scandalous piece of gossip. She rarely gave an interview, although when she did it often ended in some traumatic experience for the poor journalist.[3] Through this anonymity, Margiela was able

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[2] Anderson, James. "20 Things You Need to Know about Martin Margiela." I, November 7, 2019. https://id.vice.com/en_uk/article/bjwkj8/20-things-you-need-to-know-about-martin-margiela.

[3] Team, Editorial. "A Rare Interview with Comme Des Garçons Designer Rei Kawakubo." 2LUXURY2.COM, October 22, 2018. https://www.2luxury2.com/a-rare-interview-with-comme-des-garcons-designer-rei-kawakubo/. One time Kawakubo answered an opening question by drawing a black circle in pen, pushing the paper towards the reporter, and left the room. Another time, she made a reporter sit in a dark basement room with only a lamp above their heads as they sat across from each other in uncomfortable chairs. After giving the man barely any answers, she is finally asked, "What makes you laugh?" to which she responded with the one-word answer, "You".

to achieve a brand and style that went beyond the superficiality of most commercial brands. At first Maison Margiela marked all their clothes with a blank canvas label. Over the years Margiela chose to mark the label with the numbers zero through twenty-three. The line to which the garment belonged was circled.[4] The only noticeable trait of a Margiela garment are the four white stitches seen from the outside of the garment that hold the inside label in place. Other than this detail, a Margiela garment can be recognized for its subtle originality– a skillfully tailored jacket with slightly piqued shoulders, jeans oddly wide at the mid-thigh, or calf-skin boots split between the first and second toe.

Considering our current climate of cancel-culture it is surprising that Margiela was never accused of cultural appropriation for his Tabi boots. Brands, such as Gucci and Marc Jacobs, have been criticized for utilizing certain cultural styles, in this case dressing models in turbans and dreadlocks.[5] Social media especially is quick to point out instances of appropriation. Instagram account Diet Prada[6], boasting two and half million followers, posts daily on the subject, and holds a substantial amount of power.[7] The argument could be made that Margiela was saved due to his distance from the brand through his anonymity or the fact that his Tabi was created and became iconic well before the beginning of cancel-culture. However, much of that culture is made up of looking back to the past and correcting or restoring.

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[4] Not all the numbers correspond to a line. Only the numbers zero (women's collection), three (fragrances), four (women's garderobe), six (MM6), eight (eyewear collection), ten (men's collection), eleven (accessories), twelve (jewelry), thirteen (objects and catalogs), fourteen (men's wardrobe), and twenty-two (shoes) have assigned lines.

[5] Anyanwu, Tonya Blazio-Licorish and Obi. "How Cultural Appropriation Became a Hot-Button Issue for Fashion." WWD. WWD, November 5, 2020. https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/how-cultural-appropriation-became-a-hot-button-issue-for-fashion-1234579968/.

[6] https://www.instagram.com/diet-prada/

[7] In 2018, Dolce and Gabbana's Shanghai fashion show, celebrating 33 years of history and showcasing over 300 looks, was cancelled after Diet Prada called out the company for a racist ad campaign and Stefano Gabbana's tactless Tweets. Raga, P. (2020, August 20). Are influential Watchdogs @diet_prada Becoming the Fashion… Police? Retrieved January 10, 2021, from https://www.distractify.com/p/who-runs-diet-prada.

It is odd that Margiela, as a white European designer, copying exactly the shape of a traditional Japanese sock, would not also eventually come under criticism for profiting off a design that is not his own. That is not to say that all borrowing of culture is appropriation. Without cultural exchange many forms of art and styles in fashion would not exist. It is generally accepted that the "beginning of fashion" began at the end of the Middle Ages with the rise of mercantile capitalism in Europe.[8] Conquered and conquering empires-- Romans and Byzantine for example, and their surrounding enemies, were constantly trading methods of weaving, embroidering, and sewing.[9] As the world became more global and more and more trading was being done, materials, designs, and patterns that were once only available in specific regions could now be used to create and influence new styles in different cultures.

Much like Margiela's Tabi, there seems to be instances of appropriation that are generally agreed upon to be acceptable. Perhaps it is in instances where the value of the outcome outweighs the damage of the cultural appropriation, and there are other instances where the exchange is so complex that to label it as simple cultural appropriation doesn't make sense. One of the earliest instances of global trade was the Silk Road, active between 130 BCE and 1453 CE, that connected the East and West. From the West came horses, furs, glass, wool, gold, and weapons. From the East came silk, tea, dyes, ivory, perfumes, paper, gunpowder, and China.[10] Through this trade, foreign culture and styles were consumed and incorporated into other cultures. One of the most famous examples of this is the creation of blue willow china.

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[8] Craik, Jennifer. *The face of fashion: Cultural studies in fashion*. Routledge, 2003. 197.

[9] Laver, J ., Haye, A. D., & Tucker, A. (2002). *Costume and fashion: A Concise History*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson. 25-48.

[10] Mark, Joshua J. "Silk Road." World History Encyclopedia. World History Encyclopedia, April 28, 2021. https://www.worldhistory.org/Silk_Road/.

Traditional Chinese porcelain is recognizable for its painted blue patterns on white ceramic. (Fig 3). Blue willow china is deceptively aesthetically Chinese yet originated in England in the late 18th century (Fig 4). The pattern is aesthetically Chinese and mimics traditional Chinese paintings of nature and gardens. English potters even falsely claimed that the story depicted on the plates came from an ancient Chinese tale about two lovers. By the mid-nineteenth century, blue willow china was a staple of all Victorian households and has continued to be manufactured today.[11]

Fig. 3, *Foliated Plate with Rocks, Plants, and Melons*, China, 14th century, porcelain painted with cobalt blue, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 4, *Blue Willow china*, early 20th century, Sweden

Art history, traditionally haphazardly divided into categories by geography or era, does not often enunciate that one group's art and culture has often developed from a myriad of different regions and cultures. This paper will focus specifically on the influence of Japanese art and culture on Western art and fashion. The first chapter will cover the beginning of the

[11] O'Hara, Patricia. ""The Willow Pattern That We Knew": The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow." *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 4 (1993): 421-42. Accessed May 1, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3828644.

Orientalist movement and Japonisme– the influence of Japanese aesthetics in the West. The rest of the paper will discuss the designer, Martin Margiela, and the influence he took from the Japanese designers of the 1970s and 80s. Chapter two will introduce the Japanese designers, Kenzo Takada, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo, who incorporated traditional Japanese aesthetics and philosophy into their garments. The third and final chapter discusses Martin Margiela and the way in which his garments built upon the ideas and styles of the Japanese designers that came before him. The discussion on Martin Margiela and the Japanese designers will serve as a case study in order to explore cultural exchange and the topic of appropriation.

CHAPTER ONE

Japonisme

1.1 Japanese Woodblock Prints and the Impressionists:

In June of 1912 an essay by J.C. Pringle was published in the Charity Organization Review stating the ingenuity of Japanese footwear and the tabi sock.[12] According to Pringle the English boots that were expensive to make, easily fell apart, and brought mud in everywhere, the Japanese tabi sock and geta[13] were much more practical. Although Japan had begun to integrate Western clothing into their fashion at the time, such as suits and boots, traditional footwear, such as the tabi and geta, were still popular and widely worn.[14] It was this same design, virtually unchanged from centuries before, that Margiela discovered on his trip to Japan in 1981 and imitated for his first shoe.

This is hardly the first time Japanese culture and art has influenced the West. James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) played a crucial role in the Orientalist movement and was the first major artist to take inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints, ceramics, and interior decor.[15] Whistler first came into contact with these objects in 1862 or 1863, according to various documents and visual evidence, and the following year he became a regular customer at the Porte

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[12] Pringle, J. C. "'This Misery of Boots'." *Charity Organisation Review*, New Series, 31, no. 186 (1912): 296-301. Accessed February 18, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43789020. 297.

[13] The geta, as described by Pringle in "This Misery of Boots, "consists of a plain, flat wooden sole, with two transverse wooden blades let into the other side of it. It will perhaps make the construction clear to say that the print left on the ground consists of two lines three inches long, at right angles to the direction of walking, and about two inches apart. This is held on the foot by a thong, which is fastened to the sole just where the great tow leaves its neighbor. The thong divides into two strands after dividing the two toes. These last are attached to the sides of the sole three-quarters of the way back towards the heel." Pringle. 296-297.

[14] Pringle. 298.

[15] Refer to the Peacock Room at the Smithsonian Museum

Fig. 5, James Abbot McNeill Whistler, *The Balcony* (1865), oil on canvas, Freer Gallery of Art

Fig. 6, Suzuki Haranobu, *Young Women Playing Kitsune-ken (Fox Game)* (ca. 1768-69), woodblock print, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Chinoise in Paris.[16] From then on, Japanese art and aesthetics would become a central theme in his works. Whistler often used objects he observed and even owned in Japanese woodblock prints in his own paintings; traditional instruments, fans, ceramic bottles, and cups of sake are placed in his fantasy-like settings with cherry blossoms creeping onto the canvas, and, most notably, women dressed in traditional Japanese clothing (Fig 5 and 6).

Other artists soon followed in Whistler's footsteps. Claude Monet (1840-1926) was known for painting under the influence of Japanese art, and also maintained his own collection.

[16] Sandberg, John. "'Japonisme' and Whistler." *The Burlington Magazine*106, no. 740 (1964): 500-07. Accessed March 11, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/874429. 500.

At one point he had two-hundred and thirty woodblock prints on display in his house in Giverny, France.[17] Many of Monet's most famous works were painted in his garden at Giverny, which he

Fig. 7, Claude Monet, *Bridge Over a Pond of Water Lilies* (1899), oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 8, Utagawa Hiroshige, *名所江戸百景　亀戸天神境内 (*In the Kameido Tenjin Shrine Compound) (1856), woodblock print, Metropolitan Museum of Art

designed and took care of himself, filling it with water lilies, bamboo, willows, and other Japanese plants. In *Bridge Over a Pond of Water Lilies* (1899) Monet paints the famous bridge over his pond, inspired by the many depictions of bridges over water in prints Japanese gardens (Fig 7 and 8). In these two images, Monet's depiction of the bridge shares with Utagawa's block print the Japanese composition of a certain cropping at the sides and a unique angle of vision- a

[17] Morrison, C. (2019, December 07). Claude Monet and Japonisme. Retrieved February 24, 2021, from https://32minutes.wordpress.com/2019/02/12/claude-monet-and-japonisme/

perspective only a bird might have flying over the water toward the bridge. His bridge, although without such a steep curve perhaps for convenience, positioned under the shade of willow trees gives a similar feeling of the dreamlike setting in Utagawa's block print.

Fig. 9, Vincent van Gogh, *Branch of an Almond Tree in Blossom* (1890), oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum

(right) Fig. 10, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), *Rose*, woodblock print, Metropolitan Museum of Art

The post-Impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) was another one of many to work under the influence of Japanese art and aesthetics. Well known for his love of Japan, and van Gogh and his brother were passionate about collecting prints from which the artist drew

much of his inspiration. Van Gogh's series of flowering trees was influenced by the notion at the time that Japan was a primitive culture whose people still lived close to nature because of the many examples of woodblock prints depicting plants, birds, and insects.[18] Branches of blossoming trees or flowers were popular subjects. He created a *japon rêvé*, or a 'dreamed Japan' in his paintings, such as in his painting, *La Courtisane* (1887) (Fig 11). Here he depicted a Japanese geisha within a golden rectangle and copied elements from woodblock prints onto its

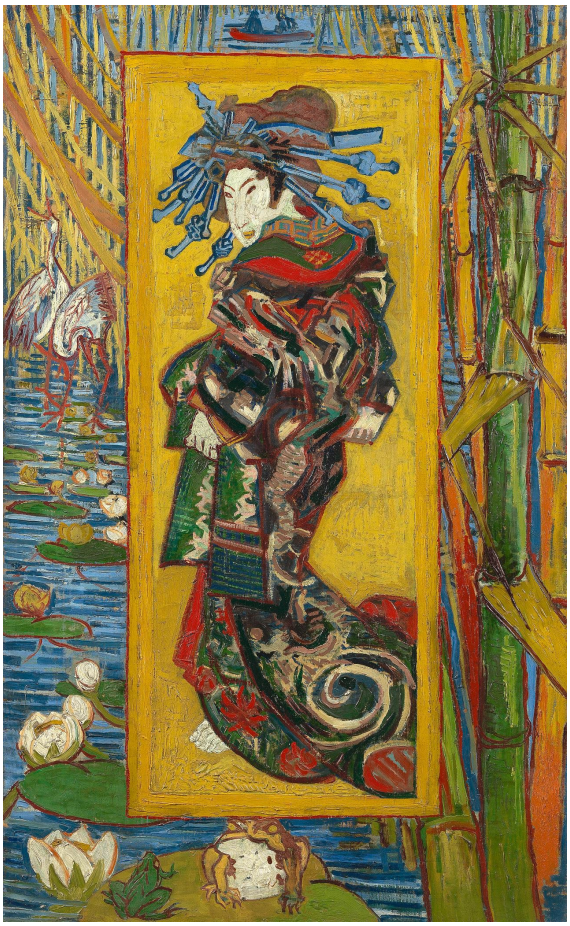

Fig. 11, Vincent van Gogh, *La Courtisane* (1887), oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum

[18] WALKER, JANET A. "Van Gogh, Collector of "Japan"." *The Comparatist* 32 (2008): 82-114. Accessed February 22, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26237180. 82.

border. Van Gogh was known copy Japanese woodblock print images right into his own paintings as borders.[19] Many others are known for their love of Japan and its influence on their work- Alfred Stevens (1823-1906), Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) to name a few. This sudden obsession with Japanese art and culture beginning in the late 19th century is known as 'Japonisme', a French term referring to the movement following the forced reopening of trade with Japan in the 1850s, that also influenced theater, furniture, and fashion.

1.2 Japanese Fashion in Western Art:

The Japanese kimono became an object of particular fascination to the Impressionists in Western Europe. Whistler wrote to a fellow artist, Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904), about the inspiration he took from the colors in Japanese textiles. He writes, "the colors should be so to speak *embroidered* on - in other words, the same color reappearing continually here and there like the same thread in an embroidery… the whole forming in this way a harmonious *pattern*- Look how the Japanese understand this!".[20] George Hendrik Breitner (1857-1925), a Dutch painter created a series of thirteen works, all demonstrating the artist's fascination for the way in which the kimono folds and drapes (Fig 12).[21] Artists would frequent shops such as Madame Soye's in Paris or Liberty's in London where they would buy kimonos and other Japanese objects for their collections. The artists would sometimes modify the kimono, sometimes adding buttons, or even dressing their models in the kimono along with Western clothing.[22] William

[19] WALKER. 106.

[20] Kramer, Elizabeth. "Picturing Kimono in Britain, Europe and America." (2020): 193-197. 193.

[21] Kramer. 193-194.

[22] Kramer. 195.

Merritt Chase (1849-1916) painted *A Comfortable Corner* (1888), depicting a dark-haired woman wearing a blue kimono with a yellow sash. She is seated on a red couch, staring directly at the viewer while hold a traditional Japanese fan in her right hand. A white ruffled petticoat, black silk stockings, and polished leather shoes can be seen through the gap in the front of her kimono (Fig 13).

Fig. 12, George Hendrik Breitner, *Girl in Red Kimono* (1893-95), oil on canvas, Stedelijk Museum

Fig. 13, William Merritt Chase, *A Comfortable Corner* (1888), oil on canvas, Parrish Art Museum

1.3 A Brief History of Japan's Relationship to the West:

Japan was not always a source of artistic inspiration for the West. In fact, little was known about Japan for centuries. The relationship between Japan and the West is marked, first by two centuries of near isolation, and then by a period of competition. The Tokugawa Shogunate had ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867, a period also known as the Edo period.[23] It was an age of feudalism with a rice farming population forming practically the sole producing class, supporting the class above— the samurai. However, after the middle of the Tokugawa period,

[23] "Tokugawa Period." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed February 25, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/event/Tokugawa-period.

commerce and industry began growing rapidly due to the length of peace and prosperity in the nation. A new economy came into being, currency economy, side by side with the land economy.[24] A new class, the *chōnin*, emerged during the sixteenth century. They were mostly made up of merchants and craftsmen, although later on peasants, servants, and workers would also come to be considered members of the *chōnin*, and they played a key role in the development of Japanese culture and aesthetics that the Western Impressionists came to love.[25]

Out of fear of foreign ideas and military intervention, the Tokugawa enforced a foreign policy of national seclusion, also known as *sakoku*, or "closed country", that lasted 214 years. Christianity was banned, and from 1633 onward Japanese citizens could not travel abroad or return from overseas.[26] The exception to the isolation was Nagasaki, which was only open to trade with the Chinese and the Dutch, their only source of knowledge of the Western world.[27]

Japan would not be able to maintain their isolation forever. The 1800s was the era in which all Western powers were seeking new markets for their manufactured goods, and the United States was set upon Japan and their raw materials. On July 8, 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy sailed to Tokyo with a squadron of two steamers and two sailing vessels. On behalf of the US government, Perry demanded that Japan enter into trade with the United States. Japan, having no navy, was forced to agree. Russia, Britain, France, and Holland

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[24] Honjo, Eijiro. "FROM THE TOKUGAWA PERIOD TO THE MEIJI RESTORATION." *Kyoto University Economic Review* 7, no. 1 (13) (1932): 32-51. Accessed March 4, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43217270. 32.

[25] "Edo Culture : Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600-1868 : Nishiyama, Matsunosuke, 1912- : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming." Internet Archive. Honolulu, HI : University of Hawai'i Press, January 1, 1997. https://archive.org/details/edoculturedailyl00nish.

[26] "Tokugawa Period." Encyclopedia Britannica

[27] "A Brief History of the Arts of Japan: The Edo PERIOD (ARTICLE)." Accessed February 26, 2021. https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/art-japan/japanese-art/a/a-brief-history -of-the-arts-of-japan-the-edo-period.

all followed Perry's example soon after. Two treaties were signed, first in 1854 and then in 1858, opening up Japanese ports to the United States and designating cities in which foreigners could reside. This show of weakness from the Tokugawa shogunate, the ruling power at the time, led to its downfall.[28] A flood of art and culture began to pour into the West from Japan.

However, Japan would not remain the underdeveloped country the West perceived it to be. In 1868, the shogun was overthrown by a group of young samurai, which was followed by what is now known as the Meiji Restoration. The goal of this restoration was to Westernize Japan in order to compete with the growing economic and political threats of foreign countries with a focus on industrialization. Feudal class privileges were abolished, a national army was formed with a universal conscription law, policies were carried out to unify monetary and tax systems, universal education was introduced to the country with an emphasis on Western learning, and Western technology began to be imported and copied.[29] Japan's slow crawl to capitalism, even after the two World Wars, eventually led their economy to become, in 1987, the second largest in the world, surpassing the United States and any country in the OECD (the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development).[30]

An economic miracle occurred due to Japan benefitting from the Cold War. After World War II, the United States played an important role in Japan out of fear that an unhappy or poor population would turn Japan to communism and ensure Soviet control over the Pacific Ocean. The United States aided Japan in establishing certain economic policies that would ensure its

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[28] "Commodore Perry and Japan (1853-1854): Asia for Educators: Columbia University." Accessed February 25, 2021. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_perry.htm.

[29] "Meiji Restoration." Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 4, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/event/Meiji-Restoration.

[30] Khactu, Dominique N. *Southern Economic Journal* 63, no. 3 (1997): 826-28. Accessed March 7, 2021. doi:10.2307/1061124. 827.

rapid growth and success.[31] Similarly to the Edo period, Japan's thriving economy in the 21st century led to a new growth in its art and culture, particularly in fashion.

[31] Nakamura, Takafusa (1981). "3: Rapid Growth". *The Postwar Japanese Economy: Its Development and Structure*(book). trans. Jacqueline Kaninski. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press. 56.

CHAPTER TWO

The Japanese Designers: Kenzo Takada, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo

2.1 Introduction:

Paris has been considered the center for fashion for centuries, with European designers dominating the industry. In the 17th century, Louis XIV and his court became the arbiters of fashion and style. The creation of *haute couture* in 1858 established Paris as the center for fashion, with luxury tailoring becoming the standard for the next century.[32] This Eurocentrism began to shift slightly in the 1970s with Issey Miyake and Kenzo Takada's debuts in Paris, and then with Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo who followed shortly after in the 1980s. These Japanese fashion designers were the first to introduce Japanese minimalism to the West, [33] a style inspired by Japan's Zen Buddhism.[34] Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo are often discussed together as their work has been deemed aesthetically Japanese, while Kenzo often drew inspiration from many other cultures.

At the time, the runway was a stage for glamour and status. It was a showcase of luxury garments, not the art performance we are familiar with today. These Japanese designers would be

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[32] *Haute couture* is also known as 'high fashion'. The clothes are constructed entirely by hand using high quality and expensive fabric. There is great attention to detail and the process is extremely time-consuming. The leading fashion houses of Paris were all known for their *haute couture* garments, made individually and tailored specifically for clients. Samborska, Magdalena. "Intolerable Ugliness. A Turn in European Fashion as a Result of Confrontation with Japanese Aesthetics." *Art Inquiry* 17 (January 2015): 309–20. 309-310.

[33] Lalloo-Morar, Sandhya. "A study of Miyake, Kawakubo and Yamamoto: identifying their success factors as revolutionary and innovative designers since the 1980s." PhD diss., University of Johannesburg, 2012.

[34] Japanese minimalism is stresses subtle elegance. Concepts such as *wabi-sabi* (the focus on simplicity and acceptance of imperfection), *ma* (the space between objects), and *shibumi* (elegance and simplicity while simultaneously bitter and astringent) are inherent to Japanese minimalism, and are concepts that Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo applied to their clothing. Haimes, Paul. "On Japanese Minimalism." *environment* 8 (2020): 51. 1-7.

the first to change that. The appearance of Western culture in Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912) began a transformation for the country, with Japan beginning to borrow styles and practices from Western countries. Government policies were modernized with the nation establishing a parliament, and Western education and technological practices were put in place. Western clothing became a popular symbol of modernization, first adopted in military uniforms, then spreading to government workers who were eventually required to wear Western suits. Eventually the emperor and empress adopted Western style clothing as well. Simultaneously, by the end of the nineteenth century, Japan was everywhere in Western culture– art, interior design, and fashion. And as Japan's economy began to grow exponentially, its fashion industry rapidly expanded.[35] However, Japanese fashion did not make a proper appearance in the West until Kenzo Takada debuted in Paris in 1970. Kenzo Takada and Issey Miyake are known as the first wave of Japanese designers in Paris, followed by Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo. Apart from Kenzo, the other three designers had already established themselves in Tokyo years prior to their Paris debuts. They were already established designers in Japan when they decided to present Japanese fashion to the rest of the world.[36]

2.2 Issey Miyake and Kenzo Takada:

Kenzo was the very first Asian fashion designer to enter the Paris fashion scene. He debuted in his small shop, *Jungle Jap*, exhibiting bold prints and colors, combining styles from Africa, Asia, Scandinavia, and South America.[37] Kenzo is often perceived as the 'least Japanese'

[35] Kawamura, Yuniya. "Japanese Fashion*." In The Berg Companion to Fashion, edited by Valerie Steele. Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. Accessed March 26, 2021. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474264716.0009483. 435.

[36] Kawamura, Yuniya. "The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion." *Fashion Theory* 8, no. 2. 198-199.

[37] Samborska. 312-313.

of all the Japanese designers who found success in Paris, due to his tendency to conform with more conventional Parisian styles. Yuniya Kawamura, a professor of sociology at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, writes, "I locate Kenzo's unprecedented success as a Japanese designer and as an enterprise in his attempt to assimilate completely into the French fashion community".[38] There is not much in Kenzo's body of work that demonstrates a strong Japanese presence. As seen in Figure 14, a photograph of garments from his earlier collections, the clothing is more reminiscent of British styles popular at the time, with knit sweater vests, denim, bright colors, and teased hair.

Fig. 14, Kenzo, Jungle Jap, Fall/Winter 1971

Figure 15 is another example of an early garment from Kenzo's Jungle Jap. The dress is reminiscent of a European peasant style cut, although the double-sided floral print, with a bold

[38] Kawamura. 118.

red made of the same print on the inside of the skirt flashed to us by the model's kick is very Kenzo.

Fig. 15, Kenzo, Jungle Jap, 1973

One must also consider the choice of the name 'Jungle Jap'. It seems as if Kenzo was using the derogatory term as an attempt to indirectly gain favor in Europe. As the first Asian designer to enter Paris' encapsulatetd and ostentatious fashion scene, Kenzo must have had to cater to certain conventions at the time. His styles weree familiar enough to a European audience, but brought some thing more bold and playful. The designer was also known for eventtually incorporating many different culural styles into his clothes throughout his career.

Although Miyake, born in Hiroshima, Japan in 1938, does not want to be labeled as an 'artist' or a 'Japanese' fashion designer, he has been both from a Western perspective.[39] Miyake was the first to bring what is now referred to as the 'Japanese aesthetic' to the West. This aesthetic was also perpetuated by Yamamoto and Kawakubo through their debuts and careers. Miyake brought a new perspective of the human form, focusing on the concept of "A Piece of Cloth", which pursued "the body, the fabric covering it and a comfortable relationship between the two".[40] This concept is an idea Miyake had of enveloping the body in singular pieces of fabric, a notion stemming from the construction of the Japanese kimono. His silhouettes, first presented in Paris in 1973, deviated completely from the traditional European methods of tailoring, which consisted of cutting fabric and pinning it to the body; a European dress was to fit like a glove.[41] In Japanese fashion, the space between the body and the clothing is referred to as *ma*. Miyake's philosophy was that the design of a garment should not only be associated with what is seen on the outside, but also how it would feel to be worn (Fig 16).[42] This garment in Figure 16 is not only more breathable than the typical tight-waisted dresses of the 70s, but stereotypically masculine. The garment seems more like the uniform of a construction worker than the outfit of a glamorous Parisian woman, yet the model is chic with her heeled boots and sunglasses. Miyake has incorporated both masculine and feminine elements into this outfit, blurring the lines between gender.

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[39] ENGLISH, BONNIE. *JAPANESE FASHION DESIGNERS: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo*, pg. 9-10

[40] "The Concepts and Work of Issey Miyake." MIYAKE DESIGN STUDIO | 株式会社三宅デイン事務所

[41] Fukai, Akiko, Barbara Vinken, Susannah Frankel, Hirofumi Kurino, Catherine Ince, and Rie Nii. *Future Beauty: 30 Years of Japanese Fashion*. London: Merrell Publishers, 2013, pg. 34

[42] Samborska, Magdalena. 314.

Fig. 16, Issey Miyake, *East Meets West*, 1970s

Miyake is also known for his experimentation with materials. He began experimenting with paper, rattan, plastic, and bamboo, materials never before seen in Paris' fashion world. Eventually synthetic fabrics and pleating techniques became a staple of Miyake's line. Instead of pleating the fabric beforehand, it is the finished garment that is pleated. The forms are first cut to be two or three times too large, and then reduced during the pleating process.[43] Miyake used this technique to create new forms and space in clothing that had never been seen in Paris (Fig 17). The garments became so structural it would seem as if they could stand alone– that there was no longer a need for a model to wear the garment. This notion would be false, however, firstly

[43] Samborska, Magdalena. 314.

because Miyake's focus was always on the wearer. It was about how the clothing felt to wear, whether it was the material, the space between the garment and the skin, and the movement the garment allowed. Secondly, the wearer also allowed the garment to move, and it was in this movement that Miyake's sculptural garments shone, shifting and flowing with every step of the wearer– constantly evolving into new forms.

Fig. 17, Issey Miyake, *Pleats Please*, 1993

2.3 Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo:

Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, under her fashion house Comme des Garçons, first debuted together in 1976 in Tokyo, and then in Paris in 1981 in another joint show. The clothing was unconventional, to say the least, for Western fashion at the time. Most of the garments were all black, and oddly shaped with their pockets and fastenings placed in peculiar positions. It also seemed as if the space between the clothing and the body was exaggerated through layering and wrapping techniques. The clothing was torn and fraying along with unstitched or even nonexistent hemlines. Not only were the clothes anti-glamorous but asexual as well.[44] This went farther than the previously popular boyish figure of the 1920s and clashed somewhat with the bold colors and patterns and glamorous evening looks popular in the 1970s and the sportswear and oversized accessories of the 80s.[45] The use of the color black, perhaps too somber for the tastes of the 80s, not only presented a new minimalistic style, but also allowed the focus to be on the shape and structure of the clothing. Yamamoto preferred to focus on the way a garment moved with the wearer (Fig 19). The space between the figure and the clothing was important, as varying this would also shift the way the clothing would move. It is also the reason Yamamoto focused much of his attention on the materials he utilized.

Kawakubo was more concerned with the structure of a garment and its decay over time (Fig 18). The designer also experimented with folding and hanging fabrics, and a lot of her work has been compared to the traditional Japanese method of wrapping one large piece of fabric around the body rather than tailoring many pieces together.

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[44] ENGLISH. 38.

[45] "Fashion History Timeline." FIT. https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/

Fig. 18, Rei Kawakubo, Comme des Garçon*s*, 1981

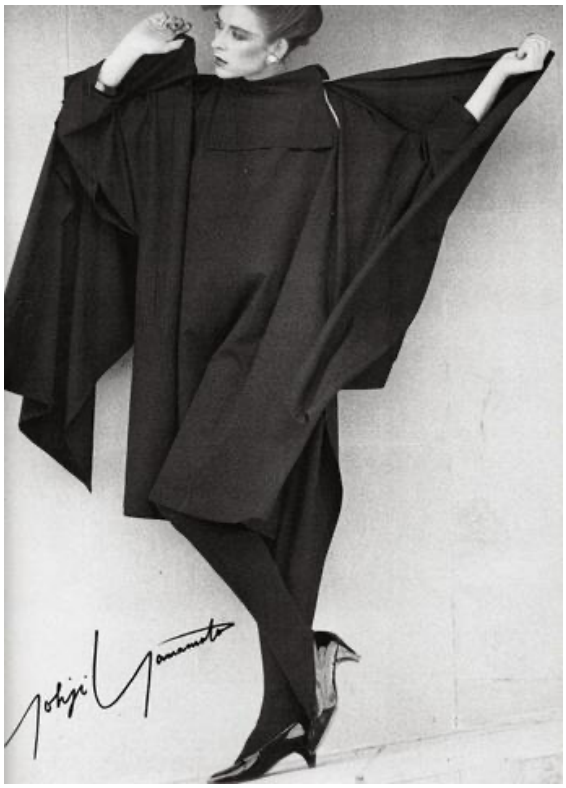

Fig. 19, Yohji Yamamoto, 1981

The clothing was met with a barrage of criticism from the media, with headlines calling the collection 'Fashion's Pearl Harbor' and Rei Kawakubo a 'rag picker'.[46] Racism also played a role in Europe's reaction to the Japanese designers, as tensions had not yet been completely relieved. Yet this style, later dubbed 'deconstruction', would open new possibilities for the world of fashion, paving the way for designers such as John Galliano, Alexander McQueen, and, of course, Martin Margiela.

Deconstructionism departed from the French couture of the 1980s that perpetuated the notion that clothing should represent the underlying cultural ideals of beauty, particularly feminine beauty. Instead of a new ideal of beauty, Yamamoto and Kawakubo focused on

[46] "1981: Paris Meets Tokyo." Shop Don't Tell. https://shopdonttell.com/blogs/the-gone-library/1981-paris-meets-tokyo

clothing that played with the indeterminacy of beauty itself.[47] Unlike the ripped and frayed clothes found in the London punk scene in the 1970s, the designers' "beggar look" resulted from the eastern philosophical tradition, rather than a rejection of consumer culture. Japanese concepts of beauty involve an awareness of ephemerality, suggesting its fragility and transience.[48]

Unlike Kenzo, Miyake, and Yamamoto, Kawakubo never received any training in the art of tailoring, which many believe has enabled her to become the most radical in challenging notions of Western beauty. Her collection "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body" in 1997 confronted feminine beauty standards found in the West, where clothing often made use of padding and wires inside the clothing to accentuate sexual attributes. Kawakubo put padding in unusual places– the back, stomach, and neck, completely restructuring the body (Fig 20).[49] This radical garment purposefully deformed the female figure, liberating it from the strict rules placed upon women's bodies that had been dictated by the Parisian fashion world for decades.

This new aesthetic, introduced by these three Japanese designers, would quickly be noticed and used as a new foundation for what fashion could be by a group of young designers in the late 1980s. Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, and of course Martin Margiela, and other young Belgian designers, would later debut, showcasing garments with unfinished edges, revealing the construction of the garment usually left hidden. Individually, they took much of their inspiration from specific collections, and these instances concerning Margiela specifically will be traced in the following chapter.

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[47] "1981: Paris Meets Tokyo." Shop Don't Tell. https://shopdonttell.com/blogs/the-gone-library/1981-paris-meets-tokyo

[48] Samborska. 316-317.

[49] Samborska. 317.

Fig. 20, Rei Kawakubo, Comme des Garçons, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*, Spring/Summer 1997

CHAPTER THREE

Martin Margiela

Fig. 21, Marcio Madeira, *Now You See Him, Martin Margiela*, 1997

3.1 Introduction to Martin Margiela:

Martin Margiela is one of the avant-garde designers to come out of Belgium during the 1980s, and often grouped with the Antwerp Six-- a group of fashion designers who graduated from Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Margiela was in the same year as Walter Van Beirendonck of the Antwerp Six, and the other five, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs, and Marina Yee, were in the year below.[50] They were all friends who worked together, and partied together, with a sort of gentle competition that pushed each of them to achieve their current success.[51] This group and Margiela are often discussed

[50] Name. "The Antwerp Six: Because You Need to Know." The Fashion Law, March 27, 2020. https://www.thefashionlaw.com/the-antwerp-six-because-you-need-to-know/.

[51] *Martin Margiela: In His Own Words*. Oscilloscope, 2019. https://margiela.oscilloscope.net. (00:42:00).

together, not only on the basis of their nationality, but due to their 'deconstructivist' styles– a term used to describe fashion that exposes the structure of the garment, and deconstructing our idea of beauty.

Margiela was born on April 9, 1957 in Genk, Belgium to a Polish father and a Belgium mother. Friends remember the young Margiela as an art enthusiast, who then turned his obsession towards fashion.[52] On March 5, 1965, a young Margiela was sitting in front of the television with his parents when André Courrèges' fashion show was broadcasted.[53] Courrèges was a French fashion designer popular in the 1960s for his space-age style and considered revolutionary for liberating women from the strict silhouette of the 50s.[54] Margiela was immediately hooked. He began modifying his Barbie's clothes, copying the styles he observed on his television from the Paris fashion shows. Margiela's grandmother was a dressmaker. Margiela spent hours watching her cut patterns and fabric. He would take the extra scraps, using them in his journal for clothing inspiration. Later, in the 70s, Margiela would create his first piece of clothing-- a doll-size recreation of a grey flannel Yves Saint Laurent blazer.[55]

It was in 1981 that Margiela was truly exposed to Japanese fashion. In the early twentieth century Belgium had developed a prominent textile and garment industry and was an important importer of French fashion. The Belgian producers held a privileged position because they were often closer to Paris than other French cities and, since Belgium was a foreign country, they were

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[52] Loon, Heleen Van, and Hettie Judah. *We Are Wanderful: a Book about: 1. Many Things 2. Limburg (B) 3. Twenty Five Years 4. Outsiders' Views 5. Glory and Relativity of Design*. Tielt: Lannoo Publishing, 2016. 24.

[53] *Martin Margiela: In His Own Words.* (00:26:38).

[54] Yotka, Steff. "Remembering André Courrèges." Vogue. Vogue, January 31, 2017. https://www.vogue.com/article/remembering-andre-courreges.

[55] *Martin Margiela: In His Own Words*. (00:29:00).

able to buy official couture licenses.[56] That is to say, the Belgians were close followers of Parisian fashion. Then in 1981, Belgium launched the Textile Plan[57], which enabled six young designers to start their own labels. However, these designers were sent to Japan to introduce their collections instead of Paris. Despite the fact that Kenzo and Miyake were not yet widely accepted into the fashion world enough to consider Japan an important center for fashion and Yamamoto and Kawakubo had just showed their first collection that sparked outrage, Japan was nonetheless recognized as a prominent political and economic power. From the late 1970s through the 90s, Japan's relationship with the West, especially America, was fraught with political tension. Their role in World War II combined with remnants of an Orientalist perception, alongside a sudden and threatening boon in Japan's economy due to the export of electronics and automobiles, left Europe and America in a state of panic.[58] Belgium, however, noticed this, and took advantage of a relationship with Japan. Belgium's Textile Plan's strategy focused most of its efforts on the marketing and business aspects for the young Belgian designers.[59] What better country to send their designers to than Japan, whose economy was thriving?

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[56] Teunissen, José. 2011. "Deconstructing Belgian and Dutch Fashion Dreams: From Global Trends to Local Crafts." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 15 (2): 157–76. doi:10.2752/175174111X12954359478645. 164.

[57] The goal of Belgium's Textile Plan involved more than sponsoring young fashion talents. Millions of euros were invested in order to save the dying textile industry. The young designers were supported, not only to make a name for Belgium in the world of fashion, but also to create a symbiotic relationship between these new designers and the failing factories. However, by the 90s it was clear that relationships between the designers and Belgian manufacturers were deteriorating, and many designers were forced to turn to foreign producers. In the end, the majority of the Belgian manufacturers and producers were unable to remain in business. Teunissen. 165-166.

[58] Kondo, Dorinne. "Through Western Eyes: Japanese Fashion in the 1980s." The Kyoto Costume Institute, 2010. https://www.kci.or.jp/en/research/dresstudy/pdf/D57_Kondo_e_Through_Western_Eyes pdf. 2.

[59] Teunissen. 163.

Although it was not necessarily the intention of the Textile Plan, as their goal had to do purely with marketing, the trip to Japan influenced the young Belgian designers' styles. It was on this trip that Margiela discovered the traditional Japanese tabi sock that would inspire his signature Tabi boot. Margiela would also go on to further develop these Japanese cultural concepts that Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo first introduced to the Paris fashion world only a decade before.

3.2 Margiela's Deconstructivism in Fall/Winter 1989-90:

The term 'deconstruction' fashion was actually first used by Bill Cunningham in an article in 1989 to describe Margiela's Fall/Winter 1989-90 collection. It was only retrospectively that the term was used to refer to the Japanese designers of the 1980s.[60] Fall/Winter 1989-90 was Margiela's second show, held at the Parisian underground night club, Le Globo. This time the invitations was published in a weekly advertisement circular called *Paris Boum Boum*, with a circulation of 260,000. It was printed between an ad for a Canon camera and a plumbing and electrical service.[61] Like Margiela's first show, the catwalk was made out of the same white cotton cloth, this time laid out between gilded chairs. The first model to come onto the runway, Paula Girardi, tripped and fell as she came down the stairs. The audience, believing the accident to be a part of the performance began to applaud.[62] Just through his first show, Margiela had already created an atmosphere where the audience expected to be shocked, to be introduced to something completely new and outlandish.

[60] Granata. 182.

[61] Samson. 14.

[62] Samson. 14.

The first look, worn by Girardi, was a waistcoat, made from the white cotton runway of Margiela's first show that had been covered in red footprints from the models' Tabi boots (Fig 22). Along the side of the garment, Margiela had written, "PARIS 23 OCTOBRE 1988" in black marker. This first look acted as a sort of transition piece, linking Margiela's first show and his second. The next four models wore this same waistcoat made out of the first runway and fastened with packing tape.

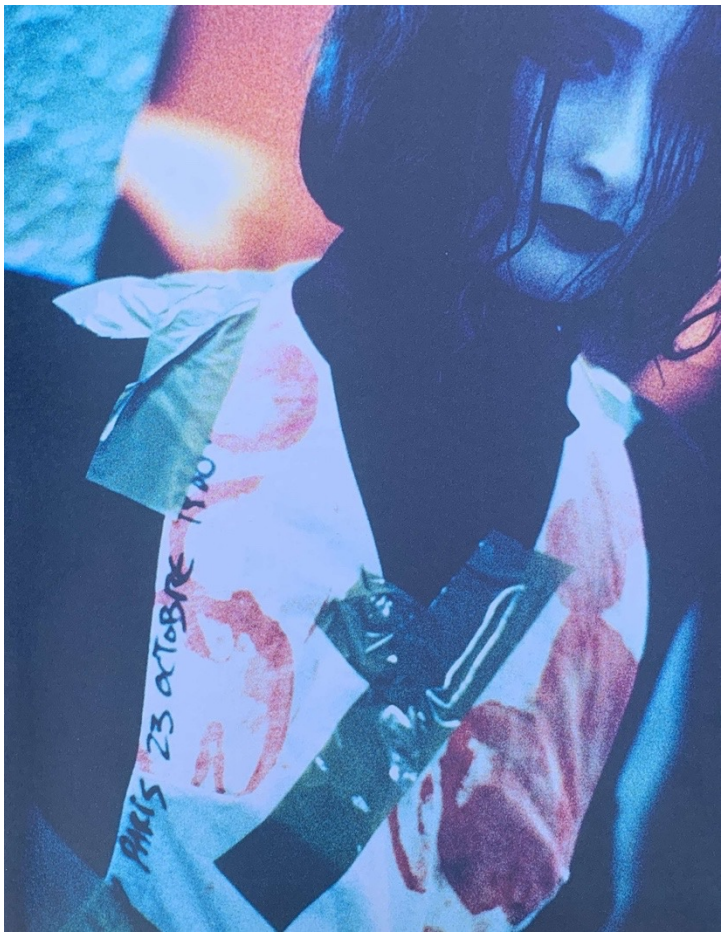

Fig. 22, Maison Margiela, *look one*, Fall/Winter 1989-90

The twenty-ninth look received applause from the audience– a vest made out of discarded pieces of porcelain, woven together with silver wire (Fig 23). The back of the porcelain plates revealed the markings showing the dishes' provenance: Moulin des Loups à Hamage, based both

in France and Belgium.[63] The factory had shut down earlier in the 1980s, and their porcelain now sells at varying prices with some of the most expensive sets being sold at around $2,000.[64]

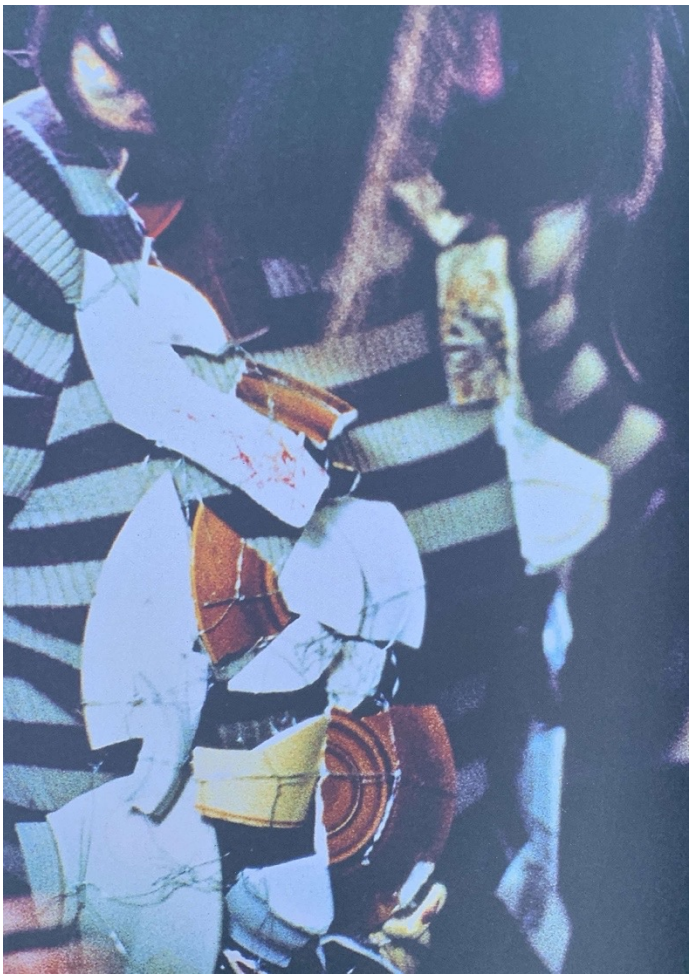

Fig. 23, Maison Margiela, *look twenty-nine*, Fall/Winter 1989-90

All the garments featured exposed seams and darts[65], unbleached or untreated fabrics and furs, and materials ranging from lambskin to wire mesh. The show itself deconstructed the traditional

[63] Samson. 14.

[64] "Set of 6 French Moulin Des Loups Green Oyster Shell Plates by Orchies." 1stDibs. Accessed April 7, 2021. https://www.1stdibs.com/furniture/dining-entertaining/platters-serveware/set-of-6-french moulin-des-loups-green-oyster-shell-plates-orchies/id-f_21059142/.

notions of what a Paris fashion show should be, from the invitation to the venue, the clothes and the models.[66]

3.3 Relating Margiela's Deconstructivism Back to the Japanese Designers:

Some believed the Margiela Fall/Winter 1989-90 to be a prank, with one American buyer walking out midway through the twenty-eight-minute show.[67] Many critics, however, related Margiela's garments to the Japanese designers of the early 80s. The designer's silhouettes recalled the silhouettes of the Japanese designers (Fig 24). Comparing figures 16 and 24, Miyake's bottom-heavy silhouette clearly served as inspiration for Margiela. The female silhouette during the 80s was more top-heavy; shoulder pads were in, along with small, pinched waists. Margiela also used shoulder pads for his jacket. However, he decided to cut them in half and turn them sideways, giving the shoulders a piqued form and making them look narrower as opposed to the wide shoulders that were in fashion at the time. Similar to Miyake's jumpsuit, Margiela tailored the pants so that the widest point were the knees, which he exaggerated by leaving excess material around the area.

[65] Darts refer to a tailoring technique to shape a garment by curving straight fabric to the body. A long thin stitch is made to sew a pinch to a point, which is then pressed down to one side. "Darts: Fashion A-Z: BoF Education: The Business of Fashion." The Business of Fashion. Accessed April 7, 2021. https://www.businessoffashion.com/education/fashion-az/darts.

[66] Martin Margiela is known to have rarely hired professional models, often choosing to scout women directly from the street to walk on his runways. Many of those models continued to work with Margiela throughout his career.

[67] Samson. 14.

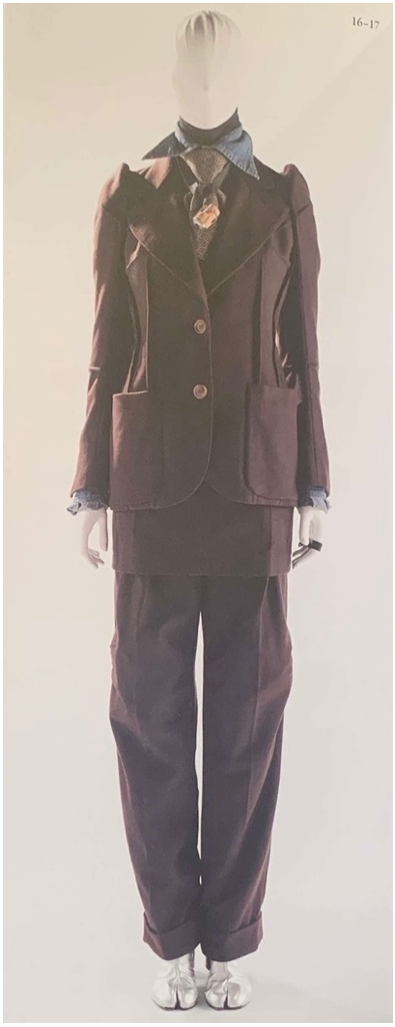

Fig. 24, Maison Margiela, *look seventeen*, Fall/Winter 1989-90

The suit is also reminiscent of Kawakubo's more androgynous women's clothes. The cut of the jacket barely emphasizes the waist, while the hips are completely lost in the layering of the mini skirt over the exaggerated pants. The addition of a mini skirt instead of a vest actually adds to the masculinity of Margiela's three-piece-suit as it flattens the hips, making the knees of the pants seem even more exaggerated.

Kawakubo was known for her garments that looked as if they would fall apart, full of holes and fraying edges (Fig 25). This concept implemented by the designer is based on

traditional aesthetics of Japanese Zen Buddhism; that beauty exists in the decaying.[68] Margiela took this concept to use in his solo exhibition, *Martin Margiela: Exhibition (9/4/1615)*, held at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam in 1997. Not only did the clothing sport the deconstructed look Margiela had become so famous for, but the designer had also worked with a microbiologist to add mold to his garments. One garment from each of his previous eighteen collections was chosen to be reproduced in white, and then soaked with a growing medium called agar. The garment was then sprayed with either green mold, pink yeast, or fuchsia or yellow bacteria and placed in their own temporary greenhouses to promote growth.

Fig. 25, Rei Kawakubo, Comme des Garçons, *Ensemble*, Spring/Summer 1983, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 26, Martin Margiela, *Martin Margiela : Exhibition (9/4/1615)*, 1997, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

[68] Haimes. 1-7.

After four days, the eighteen garments were put on display right outside the glass pavilion of the museum and left outside so that the mold could continue to grow and decay the garments.[69] This exhibit pushed Kawakubo's interpretation of Japanese Zen Buddhist aesthetics further by allowing viewers to watch for themselves the process of decay over a period of over two months– from June 6th to August 17th. Not only were the garments covered in mold, but they were also exposed to the natural elements. Additionally, Margiela had made a point of choosing garments that had been constructed out of second-hand clothing. Second-hand clothing has often been associated with the lower class and poverty. However, Margiela had created much of his collections from reused clothing, turning them into high-fashion garments and reversing the hierarchy of fashion. And now he was brushing mold onto them and exposing the precious garments to the wind and rain, turning decay and mold into a solo exhibit at a prestigious museum.

Margiela also took inspiration from Miyake for the thirty-ninth look of his first collection, Spring/Summer 1989. In 1971 Bloomingdales began working with Miyake and gave the designer a corner of the store to display his garments. One of the garments was a tattoo dress, with traditional Japanese tattoo designs framing the faces of Jimi Hendrix and Janice Joplin (Fig 27). Miyake began to use the tattooed body as a recurring theme is his works, especially after 1976 when the designer became inspired by Leni Reifenstahl's photographs of the Nuba of Sudan, which emphasized the raised patterns on their skin created by scarification. In the fall of 1988, Margiela held his first show, which also featured a long-sleeved shirt made of a thin

[69] Evans, Caroline. 1998. "The Golden Dustman: A Critical Evaluation of the Work of Martin Margiela and a Review of Martin Margiela: Exhibition (9/4/1615)." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 2 (1): 73–93. doi:10.2752/136270498779754470. 73-77. The numbers (9/4/1615) represented the years over which Margiela created his first eighteen collections (9), the days it took the bacteria to grow (4), and the hours the exhibition would be on view (1615).

fishnet material covered in ethnic tattoos (Fig 29). Then in 1989, for Issey Miyake's Fall/Winter 1989-90 collection, Miyake created a series of body garments using stretch fabric that had ethnic tattoos printed on them (Fig 30).[70]

Fig. 27, Issey Miyake, *Tattoo Dress*, 1971 for Bloomingdales

Fig. 28, Rooksana Hossenally, *Traditional Japanese Tattoos (irezumi*), 2015 for BBC

[70] ENGLISH. 9-36.

Fig. 29, Maison Margiela, *look thirty-nine (trompe l'oeil shirt)*, Spring/Summer 1989, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 30, Issey Miyake, Fall/Winter 1989-90

Tattoos in Japan have a centuries-long history of use as punishment for crimes.[71] However, in the second half of the Edo period tattoos became the marks of Buddhist priests and lovers as symbols of religious oaths or devotion. Firefighters also covered their entire bodies with tattoos, leaving only their hands and feet bare. These first firefighters were mostly made up of unemployed gangs hired by the military government to fight single fires.[72] The new central government installed during the Meiji Restoration (1868) banned tattoos, claiming them to be a

[71] Ankirskiy, Alexander. "Perception of Tattoos: Now and Then. Japan vs. the Western World." *Skemman*, 2014. https://skemman.is/handle/1946/17199?locale=en. 11. Tattoos not only marked the criminal for life but would also sometimes reference what sort and degree of crime was committed by the tattoo's placement, size, and design.

[72] Ankirskiy. 13-14.

barbaric practice. It was only in 1948 that the ban was revoked, however, tattoos now held a strong association with the *yakuza*– members of Japanese organized crime syndicates, particularly full-body tattoos, and therefore people still associated tattoos as symbols of crime.[73] Today in the West, it is common to see many people with tattoos, in all sizes and on all kinds of people. Yet up until the time when Miyake and Margiela's body suits were sent down the runway, tattoos were generally perceived as a symbol distinguishing someone in a biker gang, a sailor, prisoners– stereotypically tough men, living somewhat on the outskirts of "normal" upper- or middle-class society.[74] Miyake, and then Margiela's, use of tattoos in couture clothing was bold and radical for its time; tattoos had only began to come back in style in both Japan and the West during the 80s, although certainly not as a high-fashion style.

It is also important to note that it is not sure that Miyake took Margiela's idea for the stretch-fabric tattooed body garments; designers will sometimes come up with their clothing a year or more in advance. Yet this overlap and trading of ideas is one of many examples and a common occurrence in the world of fashion.

[73] Ankirskiy. 16-18.

[74] DeMello, Margo, and Gayle S. Rubin. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 5.

CONCLUSION

The question remains– can someone who is not of a certain culture take inspiration from another, and when does that fall into the category of cultural appropriation? More importantly, when and why does it *not*. The term "cultural appropriation" has recently become popular in the liberal[75] Western rhetoric. According to Google's data, most searches for "cultural appropriation" are in English, with most of them coming from the United States.[76] It is unsurprising considering the history of racial and cultural oppression in America. However, the country has long been defined by a black-white dichotomy, and much of the focus has been on white Americans appropriating Black culture. Within Margiela's lifetime the dialogue has turned towards other groups that do not fit within Black or white categories. Issues concerning Indigenous land, the Mexican border, and general immigration become more apparent and highlighted as a result of new generations and, now largely, social media. A recent example being the violence towards America's Asian population during the COVID-19 pandemic which has been overwhelmingly covered by informal social media accounts. It is largely due to the reliance on the internet as a source of fact, and consequently social media, that has led to this widely discussed topic of cultural appropriation. In other words, it I possible in the 21st century for anyone to reach the masses with information of their choosing.

That is not to say that appropriation did not exist before, only that it has recently become an object of question and prosecution. The appropriation one culture by another has existed for

[75] Referring to a person, usually of the Democratic Party, who has values typically aligned with the left. "Liberal" as a contemporary term of the 21st century.

[76] "What Can Google Searches Tell Us About Cultural Appropriation?" Media Diversity Institute, August 29, 2019. https://www.media-diversity.org/what-can-google-searches-tell us-about-cultural-appropriation/.

centuries, yet awareness on the topic and its many instances, or at least outrage, has grown. In the world of art, especially fashion, that was once only accessible by a small group, can now be viewed by millions from their computers and phones. You no longer need special connections and an overpriced ticket to view the most exclusive shows in Paris Fashion Week; you don't even need a ticket to France to see it. Wherever you are and at any point in time, the entire collection, show, itinerary et cetera can be found on YouTube. Gucci, for example, has begun streaming their entire runway shows on the homepage of their website for every season. Not only can you follow the most exclusive shows from your own home, but social media has seen a rise in personal accounts dedicated to fashion. Because cultural appropriation has become a widely discussed topic, accounts exist specifically to reference it as well, especially in reference to the validity of designers in relation to their identity and politics.

The most famous of these would be the account Diet Prada™ (@diet_prada).[77] The account began as a platform calling out brands for copying other brands but has grown to include political topics such as cultural appropriation, to name one. Diet Prada™ now boasts 2.7 million followers and has become influential in both the community of the humanities and fashion alike. Both Prada and Gucci, for example, quickly pulled two items from their collections in 2018 and 2019 after being called out by the fashion account for products that were a little too reminiscent of blackface caricatures (Fig 31 and 32).

[77] Diet Prada™, @diet_prada. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/diet_prada/

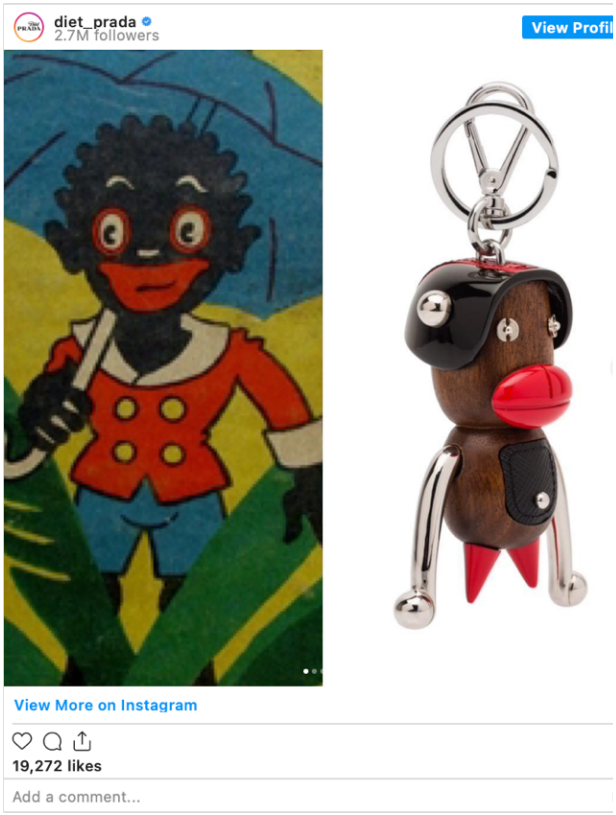

Fig. 31, Diet Prada™, Instagram post dated December 14, 2018[78]

Fig. 32, Diet Prada™, Instagram post dated February, 2019[79]

Their largest, and perhaps most successful, scandal had to do with the controversy around Dolce & Gabbana's show, The Great Show, that was cancelled largely as a result of a post published by Diet Prada™ outing Stefano Gabbana for his racist messages towards Chinese people and culture.[80]

In addition to calling out brands selling products or promoting their brand using overly racist themes, Diet Prada™ is perhaps most famous for being one of the first large platforms to begin posting about the cultural appropriation happening in the world of fashion but is by no

[78] https://www.instagram.com/p/BrYU8M6l6Eq/?utm_source=ig_embed

[79] https://www.instagram.com/p/BtlolIdlHTS/?utm_source=ig_embed

[80] https://www.instagram.com/p/BqbTkY_FB7X/?utm_source=ig_embed

means the only source of upheaval. One of their most recent posts calls out The Mahjong Line, founded by three white women, who wanted to "bring Mahjong to the stylish masses"[81]. The sets sell from $325 to $425 in different colors and with updates to the traditional symbols– flower has become flour, bamboo has turned into "bams", and the Chinese characters have transformed into lightening bolts. On their website, under "history", three links are provided along with the line, "Well, all the madness of mahjong began in China hundreds of years ago so they own that distinction fair and square". Diet Prada states, "It never ceases to amaze how white people can find new ways to colonize BIPOC's cultural heritage".[82]

However, despite hundreds of posts concerning appropriation, Diet Prada™ seems to have no qualms with Margiela's Tabi boots. In fact, in one post calling out Demna Gvasalia, the creative director of Vetements, the fashion account reprimands the designer for sending out a collection of tabi boots in his Fall/Winter 2018 collection (Fig 33).

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[81] Prada, Diet. "Three White Women Are Colonizing Mahjong with $325 Luxury Sets." DIET PRADA. DIET PRADA, February 2, 2021. https://www.dietprada.com/stories/mahjong-by-karen.

[82] Prada.

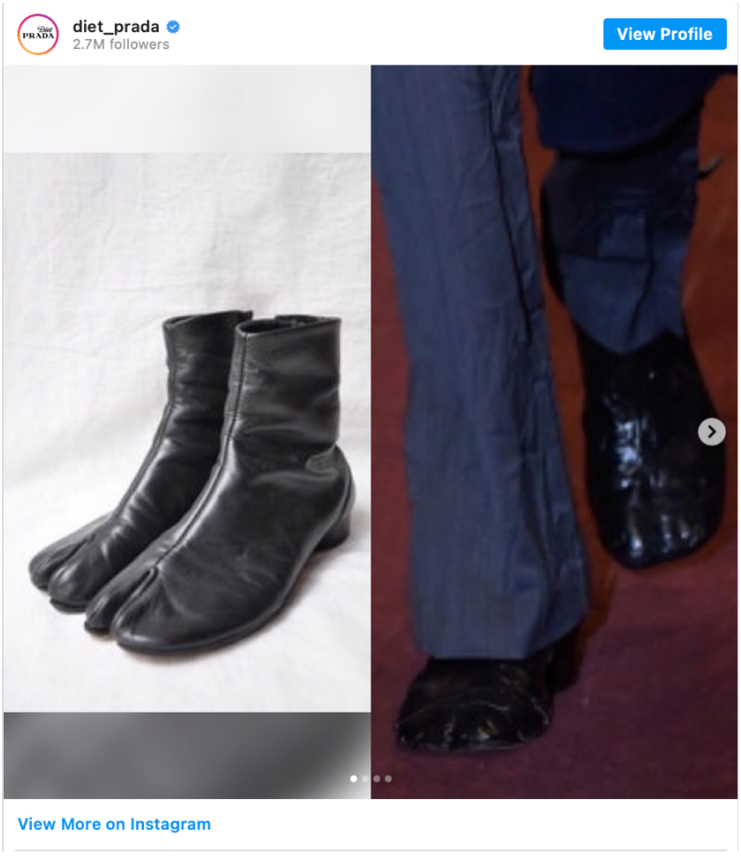

Fig. 33, Diet Prada™, Instagram postdated January 19, 2018[83]

In the caption beneath the photo, Diet Prada™ writes,

> *"Although Diet Prada has Demna's seal of approval, we're definitely not condoning the surprise appearance of Margiela's iconic tabi boots on the Vetements runway today. … "References exist to feed us, but not to feed is in order to copy– they feed us in order to create something new from it" he said. Indeed, that's exactly what Margiela did in 1989 by turning traditional Japanese socks (dating back to the 15th century) into one of fashion's most beloved cult items. We're just wondering what newness*

[83] https://www.instagram.com/diet_prada/p/BeKIh1vlfff/

> *Demna's version is bringing to the table other than supporting the autobiographical fanboy concept."*[84]

It seems as if the general sentiment towards Margiela's shoes is that, although it may take the shape of the traditional tabi, Margiela was able to make something new and radical from an object that held centuries of cultural value. Perhaps because Margiela altered the traditional tabi, even slightly, it was perceived as adding value rather than devaluing traditional Japanese culture. Therefore, could we state that one aspect of cultural appropriation is the exact copying of an object or pattern as opposed to taking inspiration from a foreign idea and altering it.

Although it would seem that the Western fashion community has embraced the shoe, the morality of taking the traditional sock of the Japanese working class and selling the same shape for $980 (the minimum price for a Maison Margiela Tabi boot in 2021) remains in question.[85] Ametora David Marx, a cultural historian, has stated,

> *"All unusual Japanese designs just become fashion innovations in the West. They're imported with a sprinkle of exoticism and without any of the social baggage of their origin culture. Few people will look at a Margiela Tabi shoe and think, 'ah, the shoe of the construction workers.'".*[86]

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[84] https://www.instagram.com/diet_prada/p/BeKIh1vlfff/

[85] "Maison Margiela Tabi Shoes - Women: Maison Margiela Store." Maison Margiela Tabi Shoes - Women | Maison Margiela Store. Accessed April 23, 2021. https://www.maisonmargiela.com/us/maison-margiela/women/tabi.

[86] Chitrakorn, Kati. "Why Margiela's Tabi Boot Is Minting Money." The Business of Fashion. The Business of Fashion, February 27, 2019. https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/why-fashion-loves-the margiela-tabi-boot.

The question can be posed whether Margiela's Tabi would have sparked controversy had the Maison released the model as a new concept today. In other words, is cultural appropriation a phenomenon of the current time? For centuries Western artists and designers have borrowed from traditional Japanese aesthetics, and although the conversation around the controversies of cultural appropriation has grown, Japan seems to hold none of these sentiments towards Margiela's use of their traditional tabi or philosophy in his clothing. Kota Gushiken, a Japanese fashion design based in Tokyo, who had been familiar with the tabi shape his entire life, fell in love when he first saw Margiela's tabi at age seventeen. As someone who was familiar with the traditional tabi shape for his whole life, Gushiken admired the way Margiela took inspiration from the traditional sock.[87] Maya Nago, a Tokyo-based journalist, says,

> *"I have two pairs…and I don't think it's cultural appropriation at all. Rather, it's a great opportunity for Japanese people to realize that [our] culture and design can inspire others, [especially] as the shoes are designed in a sophisticated, bold, and high-fashioned manner."*[88]

This is not to say that these three people speak for the entirety of Japan– a few people cannot represent a nation or a culture's opinion, although through limited research, the general sentiment seems to be that the people of Japan enjoy sharing their culture with foreigners. For example, one of the main questions tourists ask Google before travelling to Japan is whether or not it is offensive or considered cultural appropriation to wear a kimono in Japan. The consensus

[87] Chitrakorn.

[88] Chitrakorn.

seems to be that Japanese people do not get offended. In fact, sites will say that people will even help fix them for you if they ever get out of shape while you are walking around.[89]

Of course, immersing yourself in a culture and reproducing a style or object for profit cannot be equated. Cultural appropriation also implies a power imbalance. The most blatant example of this is the appropriation of Black culture by white people. Most of the stories published about cultural appropriation target white-run companies or white designers copying BIPOC cultures. Perhaps it makes sense given that white Europeans have a history of colonization. So why, as a white European designer, is Margiela exempt? The Mahjong Line also took a traditional object, modernized it, and resold it for a large profit. Minimal historical information is given on both sites. At the top of Maison Margiela's Tabi boot webpage there are a few lines of text that clarify that, "…the Tabi shoe takes inspiration from the traditional Japanese split-toe sock, bearing the same name".[90] Would there have been repercussions if Margiela had been an American designer? Japan is one of the few countries never to have been colonized by Europe, yet their relationship with the United States has been strained, to say the least, due to America's actions during World War II– the dropping of the atomic bombs and the incarceration of Japanese Americans into concentration camps.

Considering Margiela's work through the lens of cultural appropriation has raised more questions than it has answered– is it something that is based on race, nationality, religion, or history? Have we begun to rely too much on generalizations with labels such as "white culture" or "Black culture", which are infinitely more diverse and complex? As Americans living in a

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[89] Kim, Rob Dyer. "Is It Rude To Wear Kimono?" The Real Japan, April 26, 2021. https://www.therealjapan.com/is-it-rude-to-wear-kimono/.

[90] "Maison Margiela Tabi Shoes - Women: Maison Margiela Store." Maison Margiela Tabi Shoes - Women | Maison Margiela Store. Accessed April 23, 2021. https://www.maisonmargiela.com/us/maison-margiela/women/tabi.

country too familiar with racial hierarchy, are we too prone to categorization and segregation? Much of today's outrage seems to be related to the emotions of marginalized people which have long been in need of expression. With this being considered, is "cultural appropriation" the due course of social equity, or a misdirection of oppression? Either way, in most instances the appropriator must be held accountable. In many instances it is blatantly obvious that appropriation is happening in offensive and harmful ways. The question remains, however, given that Martin Margiela has received only praise for what seems to be an occurrence that is most consistently met with adversity.

I love Margiela's work. The inspiration he took from Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo's philosophies towards clothing, and the way in which he built from it allowed him to establish himself, in my opinion, as one of the most influential fashion designers of all time. His work is just as exciting to look at now as it must have been thirty years ago– the equivalent of millennia in the world of fashion. Has Margiela appropriated and copied? Is he deserving of social reprimand, to be labeled as a thief? Or is it rather the opposite—that he was deeply inspired and determined, as an artist, to honor something he found beautiful in the guise of a different culture, finding the premise of total ownership constricting, segregating, even contrived. Perhaps we can call his disguise love, removing him from the radar of social repercussion from viewers of all nations—it is what makes the shoe acceptable, even beautiful, in the eyes of people. The term cultural appropriation holds such a negative connotation, but is it possible that it can occur harmlessly, even constructively? Is it possible that it happens all the time and is the premise of all culture? Did Margiela achieve this with his Tabi boot? Is Margiela ahead of us, even now?

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