

## SIMPLICITY, COMFORT AND FORM IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN TEXTILES AND FASHION

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Contemporary Asian clothing and fashion, with the exception of Japanese, has a very low profile in the west<sup>1</sup>, despite the traditional costumes of Asian countries being regularly “plundered” for inspiration by western designers when fashion’s mood swings back to decoration and colour, as in recent seasons. There is, however, a growing interest in authentic oriental clothing, and the Bohemian look currently in vogue relies heavily on decorative textiles, “ethnic” jewellery and flowing fabrics and shapes.

The fast evolution and revivalism of fashion styles is a subject of constant comment in the fashion press, but this article discusses a different form of fashion which exists in direct contrast to both fast fashion and major designer brands. It focuses on a number of designers, mainly Japanese, who work throughout Asia, researched on a recent visit to Japan. Many of these designers are working not in the fast lane of constantly changing fashion, but on a parallel highway where craftsmanship and not speed is paramount. These clothes do not change significantly with the seasonal fashion cycle, they sit alongside fashion: this is *non*-fashion, but not *anti*-fashion. It is the creation of comfortable, apparently simple, yet often very sophisticated clothes which utilise textiles of the highest quality and purest form, capitalising on the skills and knowledge of traditional weavers, embroiderers and hand workers across the Asian world. There is sometimes a philanthropic quality about the approach to the work which involves the complete chain of production, back to the individual maker.

For the past 20 years, in parallel with the telecommunications revolution and the exponential growth of the internet worldwide, globalisation of markets has been a pervasive force, first recognised by marketing guru Levitt<sup>1</sup> who coined the term in the early 1980s. The marketing of products standardised across the globe was made possible by the new technology, and was actively pursued by large corporations. The universality of particular (mainly American) branded goods (Coca Cola, MacDonalds, Levi’s, Nike, Benetton) began to create a backlash when the economic realities of some of their production methods and the effect on poorer economies was exposed and embraced by consumers. (Witness the anti-capitalist movement as articulated by Naomi Klein in her ground-breaking book *NoLogo*,<sup>2</sup> and issues raised in

the *Brand.New* exhibition held at the V&A in 2000.)<sup>3</sup>

Despite attempts to ban the internet in certain Asian countries, its pervasive presence continues to grow, allowing individual access to images of western culture and fashion - instantly, and creating demand for products which is willingly met by the global companies. One can argue that this will ultimately be destructive of indigenous cultures and lead to worldwide cultural homogenisation, just as jet travel has led to a kind of “global food tourism”; or one can argue that the flooding of “other” cultures leads to a more fierce determination to preserve that which can be considered traditional and local to a specific area or social group, the so-called “glocalisation” - a new marketing buzzword. The impact of westernisation in Asian countries, particularly in clothing, food and consumerism can be measured by the spread of MacDonald’s and now Starbuck’s, and the desire to adopt the western lifestyle as a badge of success, evidenced by the rapid spread of global branded goods and fashion retail outlets.

But the traffic is not all one way from west to east. As the pace of life in the west, particularly in affluent cities, quickens to an alarming degree, and stress levels soar, a counterbalancing desire<sup>4</sup> has emerged (fed by the growing number of lifestyle magazines) which seeks out space for repose and quietude. Consequently, there has been a heightening of interest in all things oriental, spiritual and of ancient tradition - such as the extraordinary growth and promotion of the oriental practice of *feng shui*, or the practice of yoga by high profile celebrity role models. The home is the nest or cocoon in which to shut out the clamour of the working world, and the objects, furnishings and clothing with which we choose to surround ourselves have become even more important for well-being. Interest has particularly extended to include ethnic hand-crafted products - household items such as baskets - which are now imported and sold by stylish interior design catalogues. (Fashionability requires this type of endorsement - Oxfam has always sold hand-crafted work from around the world). These are products which utilise natural materials and individual labour and can thereby be equated with honest values: hand woven fabrics and rugs, hand made decorative items and, increasingly, clothing in mainly natural fibres, manufactured in Asia, are widely available and desirable.

As fashion awareness becomes more global, and both

avant-garde and mainstream western design receive greater publicity in Asian countries, there has been a reciprocal movement which gains very little publicity, but works by a groundswell of word of mouth and low key promotion, sold in exclusive gallery-style outlets (such as Egg and Livingstone Studio in London, Colette in Paris, 10 Corso Como in Milan). Clothing inspired by the ancient textile traditions, manual craft skills and simple silhouettes from south east Asia and Indian continents has become more popular in the west, which is reflected amongst Asian producers by a conscious effort to recreate and update traditional clothing for the modern consumer.<sup>4</sup> The age group which is creating this movement is generally over 40 (but is a far more demanding, more design aware and confident consumer than the previous generation) and does not usually consume fast-changing fashion trends. This customer is looking for timeless, understated and sophisticated clothes and has a high appreciation of quality of fabric and manufacture. And increasingly the knowledgeable and globally aware consumer wishes to know something about the pedigree of items before purchasing - their manufacturing cycle and ecological credentials. The ethical consumer is having a greater impact and is beginning to affect the decision-making of corporations - compare the anti-GM (genetically modified) food lobby, and its effect on supermarkets, and the growth of the organic food movement from specialist to mainstream markets.

But back to clothes. Several featured designers prefer to call themselves clothing designers rather than fashion designers. Miyake has stated 'my challenge as a clothing

designer has been to create something different, not traditionally Japanese, not purely western, but something which has the best of both, a new genre of clothing'<sup>5</sup>. They express through their collections a desire to utilise the best of traditional skills and influences and absorb these into multi-culturally inspired ranges of clothes, thus bringing these traditions into the fashion arena.

A key common element is the textiles starting point. In India and Thailand, for example, the concept of fashion as understood in the west is extremely new, but their textile manufacturing traditions and skills are vital to today's global fashion industry. Western fashion companies are constantly sourcing new production areas to gain competitive advantage, looking for factories to produce goods at the lowest prices and fastest turnaround, resulting in some cases in variable quality and poor reputation. The economic circumstances in many parts of Asia mean that much machinery is second hand, and becoming obsolete. Mechanical machines have been replaced in more affluent societies by computer controlled machinery, and with this transition there is a technical knowledge gap emerging in the operation of old machinery such as the mechanical jacquard looms found throughout India. Older knowledge dies out and traditional craft skills may not be taken up by a younger, more aspirational generation. So manufacturing chases around the world as global communication and economic relativities evolve.

Designer Bibi Russell embarked in 1994 on a mission to revive the handloom weaving industry of Bangladesh after its demise due in part to competition from machine-



Fig. 1 Bibi Russell with exhibition of clothes from the Fashion for Development project. Photo courtesy London College of Fashion

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Fig. 2 Bibi Russell promotional fashion shoot showing fine cotton gauze clothing photo courtesy Bibi Russell

made manufacturing (in India). This process had to be started over again after disastrous floods in 1998 swept away the looms and threatened to destroy the weaver's livelihoods and her project just before their London Fashion Week debut. Russell's Fashion for Development mission is supported by UNESCO - its motive is to create work for the weavers, aiming to combat poverty, and to gain international recognition for their craftsmanship and traditional fabrics such as *khadi* - handspun and hand-woven cotton, *dobi* - striped cotton and *jamdari* - silk cotton gauze which takes one month to produce 6 metres.

Having studied fashion design in the mid 1970s at London College of Fashion, Bibi Russell was spotted on the catwalk in her graduation show and became a high fashion model in Europe. After a 20 year modelling career, she returned to her native Bangladesh to set up her Bibi Productions label with the intention of creating new western markets for the traditional hand-woven and embroidered cloth, using her knowledge and experience of the west to promote the clothes in fashion shows in Paris, Spain and London. The clothes are in jewel colour palettes using bright colours from local vegetable dyes and styled in simple rectangular shapes with drawstring tie fastenings, shell buttons, and all accessories handmade in Bangladesh (see Fig. 1/2).

This work is not about fashion in the European sense - but about the livelihood of a people and the promotion and celebration of a country which the west still associates only with the misery of floods and other disasters. However, to persuade the buyers of the sophisticated western fashion markets to look at these clothes as more than "ethnic" fashion can be difficult. Despite being showcased at the launch of London Fashion Week, and gaining high profile press coverage, the sales were poor, showing how difficult it is to cross the boundary between what the west perceives as "ethnic" at what it will accept as fashion.

A similar supportive and close relationship to hand craft makers is evident in the work of Tokyo-based designer Yoshiko Nishimura of label TenTen, one of the first designers to be featured in the V&A's innovative Fashion in Motion events in 2000. Yoshiko Nishimura's clothes are produced under her own direction by weavers and embroiderers throughout Asia, including the Philippines, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and India, without the use of middle men or agents. After a career spent designing fashion within the commercial industry, Yoshiko has decided she now has the time to go slowly, disregarding the rapid response which the bulk of industry now works to. Her company *Chambre de N* has been established since 1992, producing textile products such as cushions, bags and shawls. Ten Ten is now a new venture into clothing.

The fabrics she uses are of natural fibres, mainly silk and cotton, both hand woven and machine woven, which are then overworked with delicate drawn thread work or highly detailed hand embroidery, featuring the traditional oriental dragon motif or her newly designed versions of traditional floral patterns. The fabrics are then manufactured into clothes in either Vietnam or in Japan. The whole creation of each design is a very slow process - for example a dragon motif embroidery takes one month to complete - and one which has been diligently researched by Yoshiko Nishimura. She has built up personal relationships with village producers over a period of years

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Fig. 3 Ten Ten: white cotton dress in drawn thread work, with transparent shawl of pina pineapple fibre and drawn thread work. Press cutting from Japanese magazine, 2000, courtesy *Chambre de N*

to produce the highest quality and refinement at a natural pace. The philosophy behind these clothes combines a strength of purpose with a subtlety of effect, which rewards the wearer through the touch and handle of the fabrics, and quality of design and manufacture. These are not clothes to grab attention from the catwalk, but to create ease, comfort and increasing pleasure in their use, made for customers who appreciate hand-crafted products. This philosophy, which can be termed "post Oriental" or modern oriental, is designed to subtly update traditional clothing, and bring Asian crafts and materials into the contemporary frame, by using new arrangements of design elements and variations in traditional cutting. For example, a coat embroidered with wisteria is based on the kimono shape but has more volume and a narrower shaped sleeve style (although a western consumer may not fully appreciate these subtle changes). Featured within the simple silhouettes are drawstring and tie fastenings, and traditional oriental braided buttons and loops.

The Ten Ten collection also includes a range of brightly coloured clothes for both adults and children in Vietnamese woven ikat. These are the closest to the traditional clothing normally associated with the south east Asian countries, but they have been recoloured and updated in style for a new customer. They now sit in between completely traditional clothing and fashion clothing, where the fabric and decoration are the most important concern. In Japan the clothes are sold in crafts galleries, and TenTen is building its clientele carefully, finding the appropriate outlets in Europe.

Shown with the Ten Ten clothes are one-off hats from H.at, the label of the Hirata Atelier of Tokyo, which was established in the 1950s and has long experience of making hats for the Japanese imperial family, and of collaborating with many top Japanese fashion designers including Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons. Now Okho Ishida, the daughter of the Atelier's founder Akio Hirata, having grown up with millinery, has started her own design range of hats for the younger consumer, who may be less used to wearing them. Fashion accessories have increased in importance in international fashion markets and the hat is making something of a comeback,

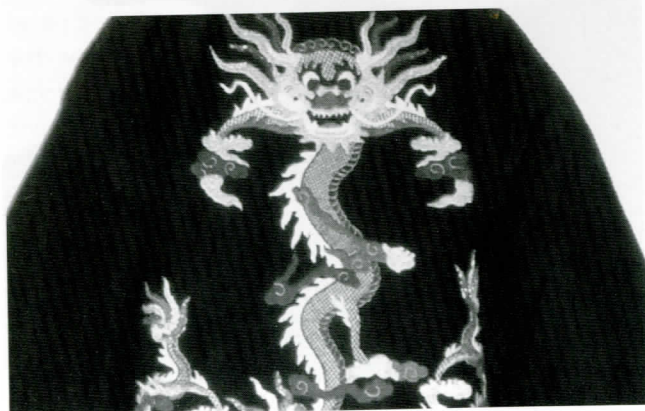


Fig. 4 Ten Ten: detail of dragon embroidery from Vietnam on Indian Charka silk, using eight colours. Photo Sandy Black

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Fig. 5 Ten Ten and H.at: Fuji (wisteria) embroidered Indian Taffeta shawl over kanze-sui (flowing water) pattern embroidered tunic and trousers of Indian Tussah silk, embroidered in Vietnam. Hat of natural plant fibre with nylon tulle. Photo Kayoko Asai, courtesy Chambre de N

particularly among younger generations (aside that is from the ubiquitous baseball cap!). The philosophy behind the new range of hats is simplicity of concept with practicality, which results in a collection of pieces which suit a modern lifestyle. Hence Okho Ishida designs these as everyday hats, rather than the special occasion hats which are associated with her father's work and the older generation. The materials for the hats are either the traditional linen braid or felt, and have been chosen and designed especially for flexibility in use. A particular feature is the variation in styling made possible by the insertion of non-rigid fabric pieces which creates a flexible section of the hat to allow it both to be worn in different ways, and importantly to be transportable and easily packed without permanent crushing. The hats designed to co-ordinate with the TenTen collection have a distinctly organic feel, in natural plant fibres with unfinished edges, and larger, bolder shapes than the usual H.at line.

The textile traditions and practices of Japan are imbued with such history and depth, reinforced by Japan's period of isolation from external influences, that designers are able to tap into this heritage and utilise ancient techniques and the inherent creativity of the makers to great advantage, combining rural craft skills with modern technology to achieve stunning results.

Polish born designer Jurgen Lehl has been working in Japan since 1972, and in his quest for the purest

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Fig. 6 Ten Ten and H.at : tunic and trousers of Vietnamese silk, Indian Taffeta silk jacket embroidered with tsuru matsu (crane and pine) motif. Hat of natural plant fibre. Photo Kayoko Asai, courtesy Chambre de N

interpretation of his ideas and highest quality in fabric design and production has often combined many sources and processes, travelling to several Asian countries for inspiration and the production of his collections. His work strives for the highest aesthetic and production ideals, achieving for the wearer a sense of sophistication and ease. The collections are textile led, with the appeal of the fabric textures, handle and subtlety of colour taking precedence over the silhouette, which is essentially unchanging, with only subtle differences appearing each season. Lehl himself is primarily concerned with textile design, constantly researching both new and old techniques. (He aims never to repeat designs unlike many designers who regularly revive archive designs.) He travels extensively, utilising the best and most appropriate techniques to achieve his aims. Many garments comprise multiple processes (as has already been seen in the TenTen garments) Several collections have included fabric woven in India, embroidered in China and dyed and manufactured in Japan.

Jurgen Lehl does not have fashion shows and uses very little advertising, but invites buyers to his studio four times a year and relies on a reputation spread by word of mouth. The clothes are sold mainly in department stores

across Japan, matching the sensibilities of the sophisticated professional customer who has a deep appreciation of textiles and other crafted products, has respect for tradition but is forward looking and responsive to new creative ideas. There is a universality in Jurgen Lehl's clothes, a pure aesthetic which can be recognised across cultures, although surprisingly his clothes are mainly sold in Japan with only a few outlets in Europe and America.

This same sensibility is certainly to be found in growing numbers in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and America amongst customers who are no longer satisfied with the clothes offered for the older market previously personified by blue rinses and sensible shoes. This is the "baby boomer" generation who grew up in the 1960s and have re-defined aging. Lehl has said 'The people who buy from us are not that interested in fashion, they are impressed by colour and good craftsmanship, and share our values of quality'.<sup>6</sup> The apparent simplicity of Jurgen Lehl's silhouette is often achieved through maximizing the cloth usage, for example some dresses have no shoulder seams and one side seam, being cut in one piece from the cloth with just a neck opening. Although the majority of his production is manufactured industrially, he is at pains to impart the individuality of hand crafted work on the cloth - through dyeing, stitching and the complex processes in the production of the weaves and knits. His work also extends to ceramics, jewellery and furniture, the latter being hand made in Indonesia. Typical of his approach when commissioning the furniture is the desire for the stools to look as though they had been collected over a lifetime, rather than recently made.

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Fig. 7 Jurgen Lehl collection summer 2001, knitted cotton top and crochet jewellery made in India. Photo: Yuriko Tagaki courtesy Jurgen Lehl



Above: Fig. 8 Jurgen Lehl. illustrated buyers catalogue winter 2001, showing traditional fastenings. Photo Sandy Black

This type of clothing design features unobtrusive lines, and is unrestricted with roomy, comfortable shapes suitable for wearing in a hot climate, giving a feeling of relaxed, assured dressing - elements which can be identified in other designers work, such as Issey Miyake, Shirin Guild and Betty Jackson. Jurgen Lehl continues to be true to the philosophy he outlined in the mid 1980s foregrounding textile design over silhouette:

*I love the kimono as an idea because you can completely forget about shape and concentrate your thinking on colour and texture. I would like to reduce the energy put into the constant search for new shapes and put it into textile design, but this goes against the current of the contemporary fashion stream.*

Clothing which has universal appeal can be worn by a wide spectrum of ages and body types and is particularly popular with the older age group whose body shape may be far from the catwalk ideal, and who can be enveloped with sophistication in generously proportioned clothes which have a simplicity of cut and the maximum fabric impact. The success of Issey Miyake's Pleats Please collection since its launch in 1988 has been due to its consummate wearability by a wide range of customers who defy categorisation (except perhaps by affluence, as this quality does not produce cheap clothing). The ability of Pleats Please to flatter and enhance the wearer, and its easycare properties (handwash - no ironing) have sealed its success with professional women. Miyake has said that 'some time before Pleats came into being I was harbouring ..doubts about clothing design ...I felt that I

must have an exact purpose in making things. ..These feelings inspired me once again to conceive clothing from the context of daily living<sup>8</sup> The continuity of fabric and technique, and the timelessness of the concept of Pleats Please positions it outside fashion in terms of radical change of silhouette, however the basic clothes shapes for Pleats Please are constantly updated with new print treatments and recently new pleat effects to keep the customers returning and the ideas fresh. The clothes themselves became a site for artistic expression in the *Making Things* exhibition<sup>9</sup> and for humorous *trompe-l'oeil* decoration in seasonal collections - for example denim printed pleats, aran knit print or handwriting from a menu.

Over the past 30 years, Issey Miyake's inventive collections have always been strongly textile led - under the long term direction of woven textile designer Makiko Minigawa who has worked with Miyake since the inception of his design studio in 1971.

In 2000 she launched her own label Haat under the auspices of Miyake, incorporating both Indian and Japanese production. The clothing is strongly influenced by traditional



Fig. 9 Jurgen Lehl: quilted coat, silk, winter 2001. Photo Sandy Black

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Fig. 10 Issey Miyake Pleats Please summer 1996 collection classic style.

Indian and Chinese costume, but coupled with ultra-modern knitwear, manufactured with advanced technology. Although the Issey Miyake studio continues to produce seasonal and innovative collections within the international fashion calendar in Paris and Tokyo, Miyake himself has now handed over the responsibility for the women's and men's collections to his design associate and protégé, Noaki Takizawa, in order that he can concentrate on his newest project, APOC (the acronym deriving from the phrase "A Piece of Cloth").

This latest project sits differently from the rest of the Miyake collections - it is still highly experimental and is being tested with the customer at all stages of development. The fundamental simplicity of concept - one piece of cloth - running through much of Miyake's work can be linked to the construction of the kimono, traditionally made from one length of patterned cloth, and traced from the start of his career.

The original version of APOC, first presented in 1999, comprised a wardrobe of knitted tops, skirts, trousers and accessories contained in a tubular length of warp knitted cloth complete as it rolled from the machine. The wearer

Fig. 11 Issey Miyake Pleats Please artists' series from Making Things exhibition 1998. Guest artist series no 3 Tim Hawkinson. Photo Yasuaki Yoshinaga, courtesy Issey Miyake

selected from the available options and customised her choice by cutting out to the desired length and style from the tube. The knitted APOC, whilst remaining conceptually simple, is however highly technically complex (and has been patented), although still fulfilling the criterion of making clothing from one piece of cloth and minimal waste. However, unlike most of the Miyake ranges, APOC relies more on stretch to fit and is therefore not so automatically attractive to the same wide range of body types and consumers as the Pleats collection - the APOC clothes generally require confidence to display body shape rather than envelop it, and so are aimed at a younger market. Even with the range of customisation possible with APOC, the tubular knitted form dictates a maximum size and fit.

Perhaps with some of these reservations in mind the APOC team led by Dai Fujiwara has produced woven APOC which was first shown for spring/summer 2000. Woven double cloth forms the garment tube and the edge 'waste' is cut to produce ties to hold the garment or is left in place to create another dimension to the clothes. In both knitted and woven APOC jacquard patterning is used

to create decoration and impart structure. The APOC concept also involves the customer in an original way not seen before, and has been presented in the form of a retail laboratory in special shops in Tokyo and Paris. Twelve APOC collections have now been produced.

The designers featured are all particularly involved with the production of the textiles which lead the creation of their collections, and give the clothes a unique profile. In this context it is impossible to leave out the work of Nuno Corporation, started in 1984 by Junichi Arai, who have produced some of the most innovative and acclaimed textiles for many designers, including Issey Miyake, Comme des Garçons and currently for Donna Karan, ATO menswear, Cerrutti Paris, Calvin Klein and many more. Nuno also produce furnishing fabrics and their own range of clothing sold in outlets in Japan, and a small number in Europe and USA.

Reiko Sudo originally worked closely with Arai, and is now creative director of Nuno, whose philosophy is to realise their creative and emotional vision through industrial (and therefore commercial) methods. From the outset Nuno (meaning functional textile) set out to produce machine made fabrics which utilised the latest technology but with the ancient knowledge and expertise of the kimono weavers, dyers and finishers she refers to as fabric engineers. The relationship and collaboration she has built with her weavers is fundamental to the production of the fabrics - her role is to provide the vision and the inspiration, the engineer's is to provide technical expertise, but she stresses that it is a process of mutual exchange and understanding. Perhaps surprisingly, Nuno do not produce hand woven prototypes which are then interpreted industrially, but concentrate on the visual and tactile qualities they wish to produce, which are then developed directly on the industrial computerised looms.- no surprise that these relationships are jealously guarded. Nuno is run on co-operative principles and is a collection of about a dozen individuals all with diverse art and design backgrounds - some previously her own textile

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Fig. 14 Issey Miyake APOC woven collection summer 2002  
Photo: Sylvain Belan courtesy Issey Miyake

students. When some of her fabrics were exhibited in New York<sup>10</sup>, she maintains she was surprised at how innovative the fabrics were seen to be - for Nuno this is just everyday reality.

The legacy of traditional Japanese methods of weaving, dyeing and printing for the creation of the kimono make Nuno and Jurgen Lehl fabrics possible, as they build on the knowledge, experience and skills base of individual weavers, dyers and finishers in small production units. Although the kimono is now worn on special occasions only, centuries of expertise is now being applied to new ideas and visions. Jurgen Lehl's fabrics are produced in small factories in Japan or India, but he is not confident that the tremendous skills and knowledge of the weavers will be retained for future generations, as modern younger people are no longer interested in the work of weaving or dyeing, preferring more glamorous occupations.<sup>11</sup>

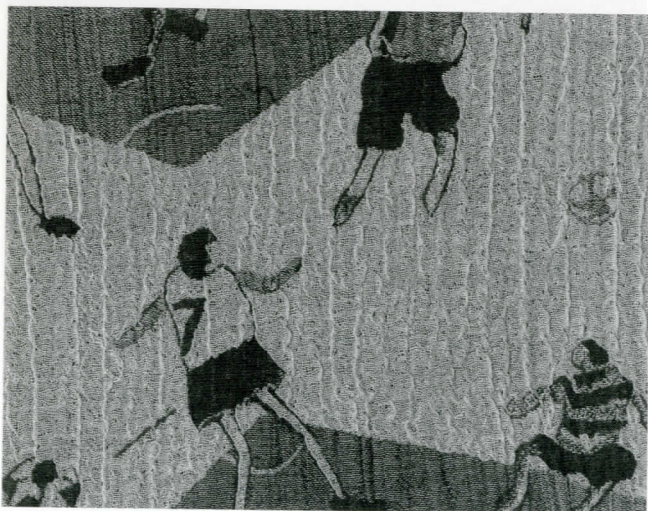


Fig. 15. Nuno scarf in woven double cloth featuring reversible jacquard pattern. Photo Sandy Black

Interestingly, vintage kimono fabrics themselves are being used in new ways, echoing the similar trend in western fashion. Although at first this may seem like sacrilege, old kimonos are being incorporated into new clothes by small design companies who sell through the network of craft galleries, and also on the internet. One studio called Mai Collection also reproduces new fabrics based on original kimono designs, which when remade into shirts, bear the most striking resemblance to Hawaiian "aloha" shirts.

Finally, the work of a British textile designer which utilises ancient fabrics and clothing shapes. Lucy Goffin spent many years working as a consultant designer with Anokhi in India, whilst developing her one-off embroidered, pieced and quilted textiles for textile exhibitions and galleries. She has an eye for intricate detail, using methods which stitch and apply many layers to create complex constructions for jackets, waistcoats and large scale throws, and for public space work. All the work is inspired by 'irresistibly beautiful materials' and these include antique textiles. A recent series of pieces incorporated rare embroideries collected from the Miao people of Guizhou in South west China. In order to preserve these long narrow strips in their entirety, garment shapes were dictated which echoed traditional kimono styles, or medieval inspired constructions, sold through exhibitions and galleries to the same audience discussed earlier.

A common theme in all the clothes discussed is their basic shape and mainly rectangular silhouette when flat, with slight shaping to the body. In order to impart confidence and ease to the wearer, there is usually nothing extreme in shape, but often a great deal of volume, creating emphasis on the fabric and opportunity for the fabric qualities to be revealed. Designers maintain the tradition and simplicity of fastenings invented before modern technology introduced zips, therefore drawstrings fasten and pull-on pieces are wrapped and tied. Ten Ten retains the typical Asian styling of fabric braided buttons and ties whilst Jurgen Lehl often uses collected shells as fastenings. These are clothes which do not change radically with each fashion season. There is a gradual evolution of styles, silhouettes and proportions or perhaps just a change of colour or fabric. Colour palettes generally favour neutrals and dark colours with warmth and do not vary too significantly. Fibres used are most often natural cottons, silks and wools, but in the case of Miyake and Nuno this is deliberately and consciously not the case, as the malleability of synthetics, especially the heat moulding of polyester is particularly exploited, alongside the naturals. Reiko Sudo of Nuno has a particular concern for the unknown future problems of synthetic fibres and takes great care to avoid too many blends of fibres in one fabric so that in future fibres from the textiles will be reclaimable and recyclable.

Even in the machine produced work, the imprint of



Fig. 16 Mai Collection man's jacket from kimono fabric summer 2001. Photo Sandy Black

imperfection or the human hand is sought, by intervention, multiple processes, and particularly using high twist yarns for weaving. Handling these is highly specialised, and there are fewer and fewer factories willing or able to take the time, as the use of elastomeric yarns insidiously takes over. Jurgen Lehl's fabrics are also very slow to produce, and he has not so far found the intervention of the computer to be useful in his own design studio.

Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons develops her fabrics in much the same way and has been quoted as saying that imperfection and the human hand is desired:

*the machines that make fabric are more and more making uniform, flawless textures. I like it when something is off - not perfect. Hand weaving is the best way to achieve this. Since this isn't always possible, we loosen a screw of the machines here and there so they can't do exactly what they're supposed to do.*<sup>12</sup>

Both Miyake and Lehl have positioned themselves as working between oriental and western sensibilities. Their complex production processes create a hybrid fashion which can be said to be truly global, but in a new sense which celebrates the skills and knowledge of their makers.

Much of the work featured is considered to be more appropriately shown in galleries than fashion outlets, while some straddles both markets. The recent polarisation of the fashion market in the UK has led to the demise of the middle market and a clear distinction in consumption between basic clothing at the lowest price, and a hunger for top designer fashion labels and branded goods, (nowhere more evident than in Tokyo) But the parallel fashion which has been introduced seems set for steady growth as the fashion consumer grows older and much

more discerning in taste, and a different retail environment emerges. This relatively hidden strata of the fashion industry will grow in importance in response to the changing demographic profile and the evolving consumer demand.

## NOTES

- 0 the term 'west' is used throughout to refer to the countries and in particular fashion markets of Europe and USA
- 1 Levitt, T. *The Globalisation of Markets* 1983
- 2 N. Klein *NoLogo* Flamingo, London 2000. A controversial expose of corporate working methods and motivation in the clothing and other industries.
- 3 The *Brand.New* exhibition at the V&A London 2000 highlighted the advertising methods of fashion and lifestyle brands, how their values are communicated and their role in the construction of personal identity in the context of global consumerism.
- 4 For a survey of Asian fashion designers outside Japan, see D Bullis, *Fashion Asia* Thames & Hudson, London 2000
- 5 M.Holborn, *Issey Miyake*, Taschen, 1995, p44
- 6 Taken from interview with Jurgen Lehl in *The Daily Yomiuru*, Tokyo, 20/10/94
- 7 Jurgen Lehl quoted in L Koren *New Fashion Japan*, Kodansha International: Tokyo, New York, 1984, p140.
- 8 *Issey Miyake Making Things*, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain and Actes Sud, 1998 p 106
- 9 *Issey Miyake Making Things exhibition*, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris 1998
- 10 *Structure and Surface, Contemporary Japanese Textiles*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1998. Catalogue by C McCarty and M McQuaid.
- 11 Author interview with Jurgen Lehl, July 2000, Tokyo
- 12 Rei Kawakubo, quoted in L Koren *New Fashion Japan*, Kodansha International: Tokyo, New York, 1984, p 117.

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Fig. 17 Lucy Goffin, silk, cotton and hemp waistcoat using hemp fabric from Guizhou province China and Japanese indigo dyed silk. Photo G Gough