

When east meets west

In the beginning, there were ankle socks. Then came cartoon characters and pigtails, Hello Kitty T-shirts, fake tans and flip-flops. **Hadley Freeman** on how Britain's designers and high streets are turning Japanese

Ankle socks began to creep into the picture about 10 years ago, when they were styled on T-shirts and, of course, Hello Kitty. Previously, western conceptions of contemporary Japanese fashion tended to revolve around two very different looks: head-to-toe high fashion labels (notably Louis Vuitton) or the complex styles of the rigorously intellectual native designers, such as Toki Yamamoto and Issey Miyake, who insisted on elevating to an art form concepts such as the pleat. But something has changed. Japanese teenagers have been overturning the country's traditions, and designers' ideas of Japanese style, with their clothes, which run the gamut from super-tights (cartoon characters, T-shirts and pigtails) to super-cool (low-slung baggy trousers and patterned belts). In the past, they have been identified as able by what could be called extreme fashion: Hello Kitty T-shirts, beach-out skirts, ankle socks and flip-flops. "The Japanese have always been very good at assimilating outside



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influences and reinterpreting them," says writer and musician Matt Edwards, who spent last year studying in Japan. "For example, one of Japan's three alphabets comes from the Chinese language, which the Japanese brought across and adapted to their own use. When adapted, it opened up to the west in the mid-19th century, it took on elements of western culture and modified them. Hello Kitty is a perfect example: it's like a reinterpreted Disney character.

Japanese street fashion, though really varied, can basically be described as exaggerated western fashion."

Now western fashion, in that cyclical movement that characterises fashion as a whole, is assimilating the look itself. Clements Ribon's poppy-print camies, Boyd's slogan T-shirts and Elyz Kishimoto's technicolour floral print socks, dresses and coats already look set to be among summer's biggest fashion hits.

But something else is being assimilated by what could be called extreme fashion: Hello Kitty T-shirts, beach-out skirts, ankle socks and flip-flops. "The Japanese have always been very good at assimilating outside

and this is apparent in the streetwear." London and Manchester are turning themselves into Japanese superstores, stocking street labels, art and music never before available in Britain, as part of their Tokyo Live event.

"Japanese street fashion is like fashion liberation," says Anna King, a British freelance fashion writer who has lived in Tokyo for eight years. "The bright colours, the reworked traditional patterns, the little bags—these teenagers have both a rebellious attitude to fashion and a fearlessness. Their style is almost confrontational. You can't help but look at them."

The contrast between what Japanese teenagers wear on the streets and what the more high-concept designers create in their studios is striking. On the one hand, we have a skirt with overlaid diagonal pleats and deconstructed stitching on the other, we have a pink and yellow ankle sock.

"This duality is very representative of the country as a whole," says Susanne Tide-Frater, head of fashion director at Selfridges. "While Japan is a very futuristic country, it also still relies heavily on tradition. There is a real interest in role-play, too,



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More role-play is apparent among the teenagers so-called 'style tribes'. Despite the apparent anarchy of traditional patterns, every element is strictly controlled and how a teenager dresses is determined by the 'tribe' to which he or she belongs. Tribes such as last year's ganguro girls, with their tanned faces and platinum hair, or the ultra-kiash Shibuya tribe, are generated and discarded at Niko-and-you'll miss-them speed.

This Day-Glo, attention-grabbing look, so different from anything Japan had seen previously, emerged in part as a reaction to the country's recent economic instability—while high-status accessories remain extremely popular there has been a return to designers of cheaper clothing.

It can also be seen as a younger generation reaction to the sombre tone forced on their parents by the depression. "All teenagers rebel," King says, "and what better way to rebel against the solemnity of their parents than through happy, smiley, wear-and-be-damned clothing?"

After a decade of safe sportswear and demure neckties, followed by last year's high-octane glee, western consumers have embraced this more good-humoured approach to fashion. The high turnover of styles also attracts wearers tired of the way one trend, be it sportswear or retro 80s, infiltrates every collection, every store on the high street. The only reason Japanese style has taken so long to arrive in the west, Tide-Frater says, is that there have been practical problems exporting the clothes and adapting them to western sizes.

"Basically, Japanese street fashion is fun and this is what appeals to westerners," King says. "When I go to the UK now and go through Hoxton Square or Shoreditch, I sometimes think I'm back in Tokyo."

Courts

Overexposed

Jackie O

Oh, to have blossomed at the start of the 60s, when the happy clash of social change and technological advancement caused everyone suddenly to be fabulous. It was then that a president's wife in Lake Champlain became an untouchable style icon, whose name has become synonymous with a certain look (side-all-amount sunglasses, an expression of stoicism in the face of philanthropy etc). Once again, her influence is haunting fever pitch—on the recent catwalk run, all Marc

Jacobs' various autumn/winter shows had a Jackie O touch about them.

More pressing is the retrospective of her clothes about to open at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has provided endless articles about her ever-so-fascinating style.

We're with Karl Lagerfeld on this one—the Jackie O show was allegedly scheduled only after he pulled out of a planned Chanel exhibition. Of the Metropolitan, he is dismissive. "It's perfect. They call it the Neoplatonist Museum," says Lagerfeld, who is embracing as ever. **Charlie Porter**



Oversubscribed

Post-it notes

You know the lost Post-it note, the one that always goes missing with that vital number scribbled on it? Not any more, thanks to Tom Ford at Gucci. In his autumn/winter collection, Ford had killer dresses that strangely resembled the sticky office essential. Now the note will be a thing of the past—all you have to do is stick the yellow fast on your general. Not only will you have instant, cutting-edge chic (especially since Ford's does not go on sale until late summer), but its use in the office will ever shut it out again for forgetting that fantastic idea you had for the brainstorming meeting in five minutes. Meanwhile, fashionistas will wonder how you got hold of the Gucci look so quickly and will envy you for being fantastically well-connected.

Gucci's violet number looked best, so if you're on a budget, just pop down to Office World and buy a bumper pack of Post-its, plus a few low-toppers. Hey presto: cheap chic and perfect workwear. Who says fashion isn't practical? **Rachel Garnett**

Overheard



"Glamouflage"

1. Missy Elliott's characteristic taste on the military look—sequin-bedecked camouflage (not much pop when hiding in the jungle).
2. The gully concealment of your guilty consumption of the cult of Glamour (in your handbag, naturally).

Pretend you know all about

Tiger

With the current vogue for label regeneration, there is always an element of humour at work. (Please, ha! Who'd wear that? Oh, Us.) So how should you respond to the reinvention of Tiger of Sweden, the second most popular label in its homeland, founded in 1903 by Markus Schanzman and Hjalmar Nordstrom? Roll around on the floor, obviously.

But wait, Tiger, a menswear label that has just opened its first UK store in Covent Garden, has some fine products on offer. Its pale blue jeans are right on the mark—skinny, fitted, but also rugged, with great

three-pleat stitching on the back pockets. Next to them on the shelves are cute summer T-shirts and V-necked sweaters, and in a few months' time, head there for some immaculately cut chunky coats fit to brave a Scandinavian winter.

The man behind this rebirth is CEO Roger Tjellberg, but perhaps more telling is the unofficial gift given to the label by Wallpaper's Tyler Brule, a lover of all things Swedish. Expect to see Tiger denim falling off some impossibly beautiful, buffed models in his magazine's photo shoots any day now. **CP**

Jeans, £75, from Tiger, 28a Floral St, London WC2, 020-7378 6578



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