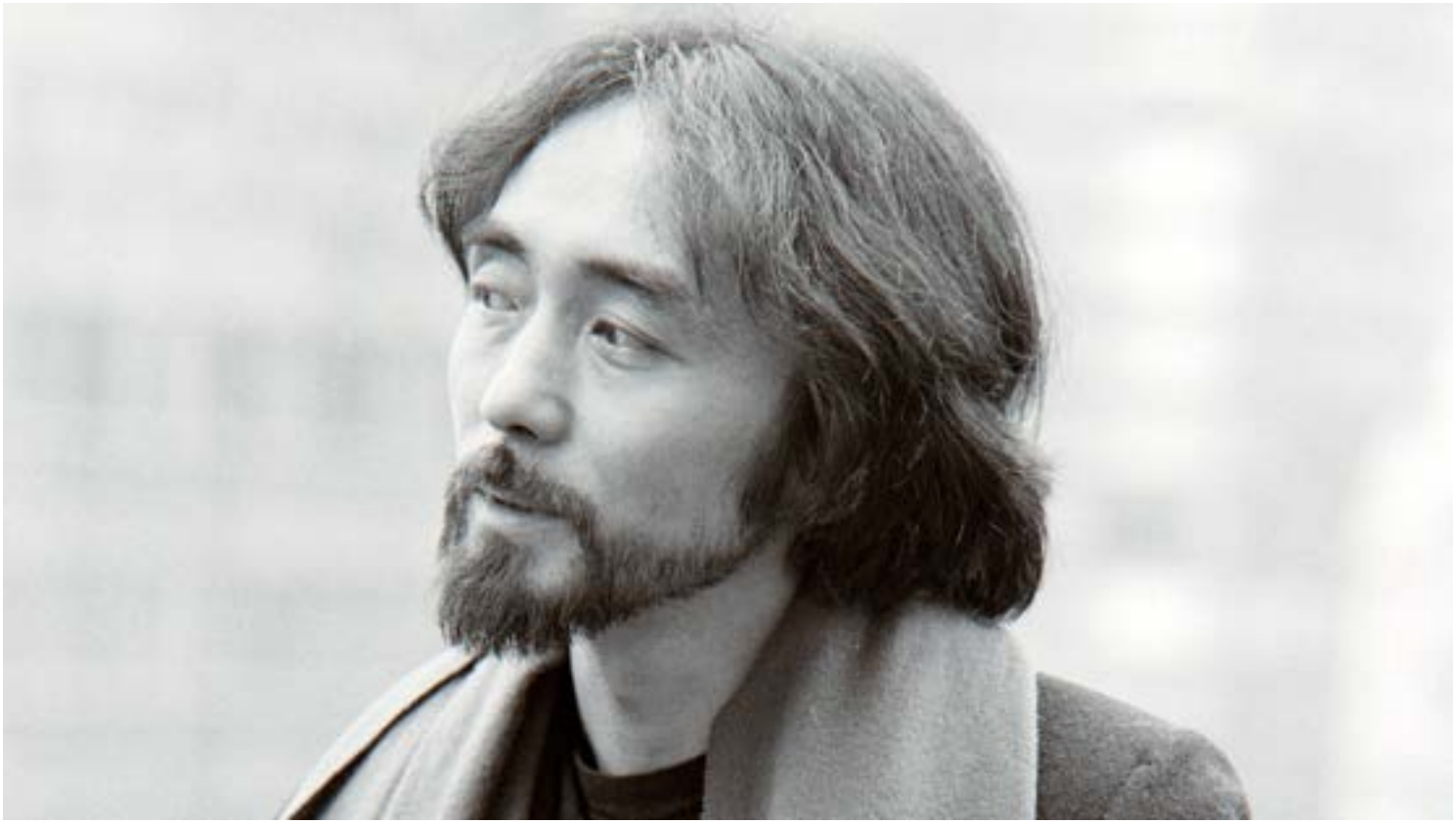


THE A-Z GUIDE TO YOHJI YAMAMOTO

WRITTEN BY
Chris Gayomali

ARCHIVIST & CREATIVE CONSULTANT
My Clothing Archive

Introduction

CLOSE

> “I was born in the ruin. I had no memory about Japanese culture, because those things were all destroyed. So maybe this is my root, the ruined Tokyo.” — Yohji Yamamoto

Fashion has long been enamored with death: its spectral qualities, its unknowability, its frequent reminders that our time here on Earth is limited. But few have been as haunted by death’s looming presence as Yohji Yamamoto, the master tailor, whose work—at times urgent, often elegant, always existential—is a lifelong exploration of what it means to experience the world in something as fragile as the human body. “I think perfection is ugly”

world in something as fragile as the human body. "I think perfection is ugly," Yamamoto has said. "Somewhere in the things humans make, I want to see the scars, failure, disorder, distortion. If I can feel those things in work by others, then I like them." Impermanence and resilience, cut into cloth.

Yamamoto has joked that his slight frame, at just over five-feet tall, is a result of wartime malnourishment. He was born in 1943 in the "burnt-out plain that was Tokyo," two years before the United States detonated twin atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yamamoto was raised by his mother Fumi, an accountant who helped run the family business. His father, Fumio, a food supplier and amateur photographer, was killed in combat in the Philippines when Yohji-san was just a year old. His remains were never recovered. Instead, buried in his grave is his beloved film camera. "He went against his will," Yamamoto has said of his father's conscription. "When I think of my father, I realize that the war is still raging inside me."

After the war, his mother decided not to remarry and that she would raise Yohji-san herself. And the one job she could work from home was dressmaking.

Fumi had gone to fashion school and was a skilled patternmaker and sewer, while Yohji-san was a dutiful son; a "good boy," as he once put it. In high school, he harbored aspirations to one day become a painter. His mother, however, would rather he become a lawyer, and "I have a duty to make my mother happy," he has said. In 1966, Yamamoto graduated from Keio University, a revered school, with a degree in law. But he couldn't bring himself to practice. After a sojourn throughout Europe, including a stop in his future home of Paris, he told his mother that instead of law he would like to pursue a more creative path and work at her shop. Furious, Fumi stopped speaking to him for two weeks.

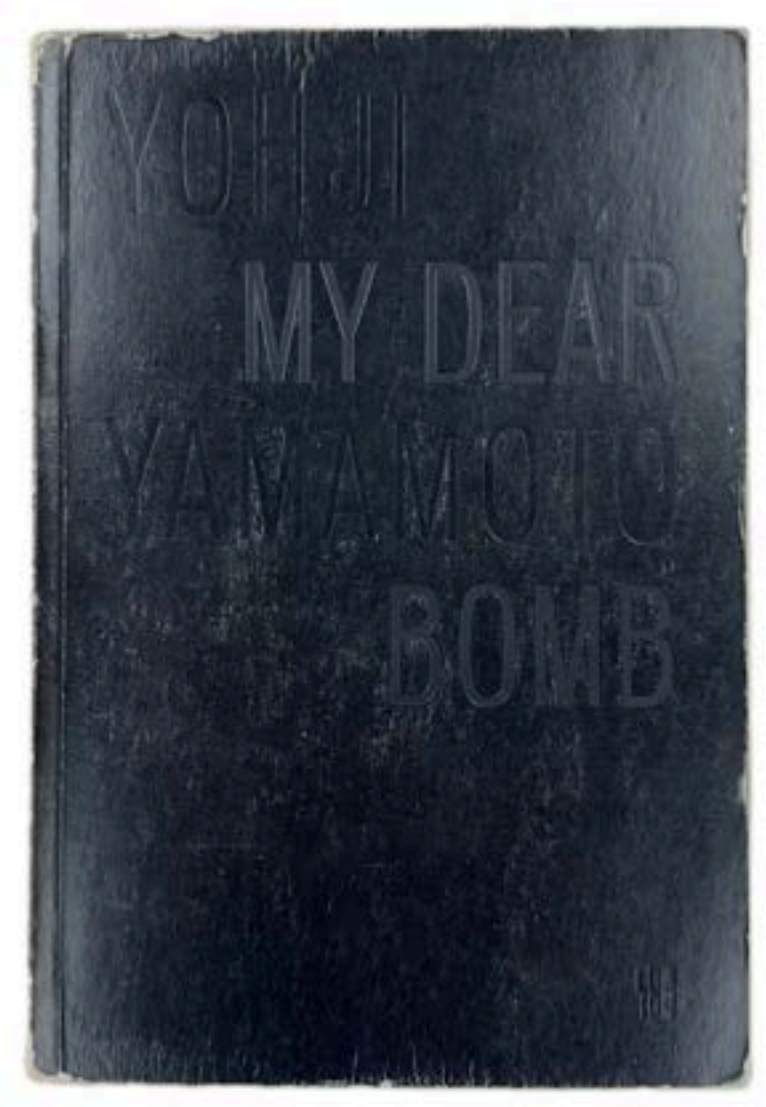
When she finally relented, it was with one request: he would have to learn the craft of tailoring properly, she said, "so the seamstresses don't make fun of you." At age 23, Yamamoto enrolled at Bunka Fashion College, his mother's alma mater, to study dressmaking.

By the 1970s, Fumi's dress business was doing well, and Yohji-san was a helpful presence. The clientele were usually well-off and fashionable women—women, he noticed, who would often ask for the same designs. "The outfit dresses which were ordered were all doll-like, sexy, gorgeous. Feminine," Yamamoto said in a Business of Fashion interview. "Which... I didn't like too

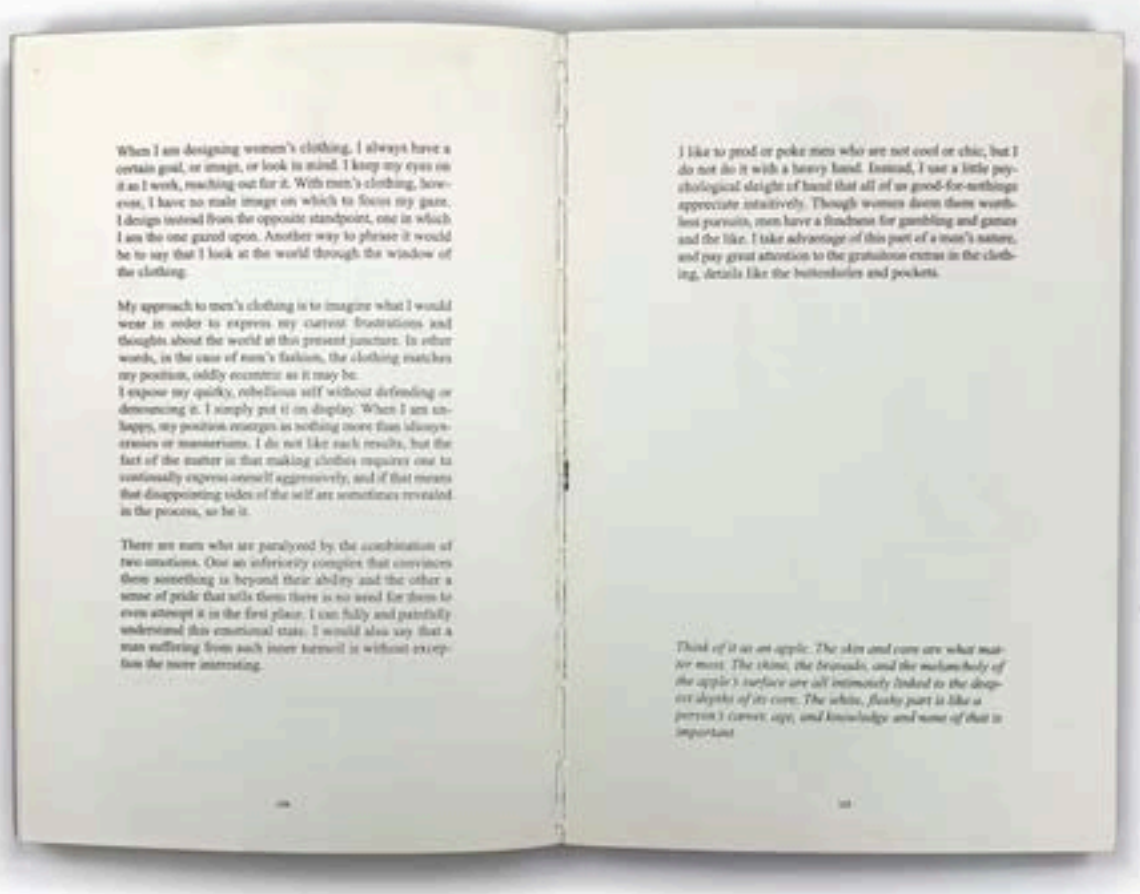
much.

As he wrote in his 2010 autobiography, *My Dear Bomb*, “Trying to make a woman appear voluptuous, working to present her as a young woman of good breeding, I will have none of that. And the business suits that women conventionally wear for corporate recruiting are not designed to make them look capable, really. They are designed to titillate the middle-aged men who might hire them.” (The autobiography is poetic and funny in an almost delinquent way, and also hard to find. Used copies start at over $100.)

1.



2.



When I am designing women's clothing, I always have a certain goal, or image, or look in mind. I keep my eyes on it as I work, reaching out for it. With men's clothing, however, I have no male image on which to focus my gaze. I design instead from the opposite standpoint, one in which I am the one gazed upon. Another way to phrase it would be to say that I look at the world through the window of the clothing.

My approach to men's clothing is to imagine what I would wear in order to express my current frustrations and thoughts about the world at this present juncture. In other words, in the case of men's fashion, the clothing matches my position, oddly eccentric as it may be.
I expose my quirky, rebellious self without defending or denouncing it. I simply put it on display. When I am unhappy, my position emerges as nothing more than idiosyncrasies or mannerisms. I do not like such results, but the fact of the matter is that making clothes requires one to continually express oneself aggressively, and if that means that disappointing sides of the self are sometimes revealed in the process, so be it.

There are men who are paralyzed by the combination of two emotions. One an inferiority complex that convinces them something is beyond their ability and the other a sense of pride that tells them there is no need for them to even attempt it in the first place. I can fully and painfully understand this emotional state. I would also say that a man suffering from such inner turmoil is without exception the more interesting.

I like to prod or poke men who are not cool or chic, but I do not do it with a heavy hand. Instead, I use a little psychological sleight of hand that all of us good-for-nothings appreciate intuitively. Though women deem them worthless pursuits, men have a fondness for gambling and games and the like. I take advantage of this part of a man's nature, and pay great attention to the gratuitous extras in the clothing, details like the buttonholes and pockets.

Think of it as an apple. The skin and core are what matter most. The shine, the bruises, and the melancholy of the apple's surface are all intimately linked to the deepest depths of its core. The white, flashy part is like a person's career, age, and knowledge and none of that is important.

1. *MY DEAR BOMB* (YAMAMOTO, 2010).

2. INSIDE OF *MY DEAR BOMB*.

Out of that crucible emerged an early version of the Yohji design philosophy: that clothing should be drapey and fluid, often black, and it should augment and obscure the female silhouette rather than adhere to it. Instead of minimizing the wearer within the confines of one's gender, Yamamoto's tailoring blossoms out of hidden dimensions to instead ask questions that are more interested in figuring out what style could even be: anti-trend, anti-hypersexual, anti-status.

Eventually, after working in his mother's shop for several years, Yohji Yamamoto debuted his first womenswear collection, Y's, in Tokyo in 1977

Yamamoto debuted his first womenswear collection, PS, in Tokyo in 1971. Then in 1981 (and soon followed by his then-girlfriend Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons), he was invited to show his collection in Paris by the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. Yohji Yamamoto's inaugural FW81 womenswear show—moody, otherworldly, militant; a declaration of arrival—inspired a spectrum of awe and confusion, as well as overt orientalism, from critics who couldn't quite make sense of the designer's expansive vision of womanhood. It wasn't until the mid-eighties (around when mens was introduced AW84-85) that the fashion world began to catch up to the idea that Yohji Yamamoto was a course correction, a rebellion against the sexy luxury of houses like Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent.

"At first, of course, I was considered a Japanese designer [who had] come as a sort of migrant worker, but after releasing six or seven collections people began to treat me as a Parisian designer," Yamamoto writes in Bomb. "However, a part of me has always been like a child secretly working his mischief. I was turning my back to stick out my tongue at the world, so when they praised me for it, I immediately felt uneasy."

The uneasiness, that outsider status, that aura of refusal, is the fundamental creative tension at the heart of Yohji. It's what makes the designer's work special and has inspired legions of fans and collectors. "My life is thinking about women," Yamamoto has said. "First my mother—last my daughter. And in between are all the secret ones."

Below, a primer on the life, philosophy, and work of Yohji Yamamoto, from A to Z.

Avant-garde

CLOSE

In art, the avant-garde is an expression of innovative ideas and radical experimentation. In fashion, the term is often reduced to a category of designers with more out-there sensibilities—a distinction that Yamamoto abhors. As he writes in Bomb: "In its original sense, the term simply meant being a little ahead of the pack... It is rather easy to imagine and create wildly fantastic clothing with no regard for the realities of the world." A true avant-garde sensibility is more practical, Yamamoto argues; the clothes should be wearable and acknowledge reality "while simultaneously providing a glimpse of the solutions and surprises that tomorrow will surely bring."

In that way, the work of Yohji Yamamoto, often somber, is rooted in optimism.

even in spite of his preferred color palette...

1.



2.





1. BLAZER, SS85.

2. BACK OF BLAZER, SS85.

Black

CLOSE

Difficult, romantic, unforgiving: black is the quintessential Yohji color. Removing bright colors has a narrowing effect, diverting the eye's attention to the cut, drape, pattern, and the fluidity of the fabric—which only serves to highlight Yamamoto's tailoring. "Black is really challenging," he told *GQ*. "You need perfect technique."

1.





2.





3.



1. LEOPARD JACKET, FW92.

2. DETAIL OF LEOPARD JACKET, FW92.

3. BACK OF LEOPARD JACKET, FW92.

Comme des Garçons

CLOSE

It’s unclear when, exactly, the relationship between Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons began, after the dissolution of his first marriage to Toshiko Ota, a classmate at Bunka, in the late sixties. Malcolm McClaren, the fashion designer and manager of the Sex Pistols, remembers the pair walking into the clothing store he and his partner, the designer Vivienne Westwood, managed in London’s West End district in the late ‘70s. (He did not realize that Yamamoto and Kawakubo were designers but thought the pair incredibly stylish.)

“I first met Kawakubo while we were simultaneously opening shops at Shibuya Seibu,” Yamamoto remembers. “While I was decorating the interior with Goichi Hayashi, Kawakubo was working on her own opening preparations in the next booth.” The two started to make small talk and a “friendship” blossomed from there. “Since then, we have become kindred spirits in a friendly rivalry, sharing the same values in clothes making and as fashion designers. She has had a great impact on my life and my work in the fashion world.”

1.





2.



1. FLORAL TURTLENECK, FW95.

2. BACK OF FLORAL TURTLENECK, FW95.

Details

CLOSE



YAMAMOTO AND ASSISTANTS (PHOTO BY FAIRCHILD ARCHIVE/WWD/PENSKE MEDIA VIA GETTY IMAGES).

The best way to understand Yamamoto's mastery is to understand how he views something in the specific. Consider one of his early obsessions: the collar.

"During my first ten years making clothing I grappled with the idea of the collar— why does clothing need it? Is there no other way to handle this part of a garment?" Yamamoto asks in *Bomb.*

From an unenlightened perspective, the collar is a simple invention; it's a hole for the head to poke out. But Yamamoto spent years examining its curves, its drape and tensile qualities, as if the collar had the historical import of the Dead Sea Scrolls. "If one studies a pattern for a collar one soon notices that it has a boomerang shape. Perhaps it is better thought of as resembling the gentle curve of a Japanese katana, or sword. When this curved item is bent, it attaches itself to the neck. This curve is the very lifeblood of the collar, and the arc must be infused with some tension. In the tiny area allotted to this feature even a few millimeters' difference can bring out the distinctiveness or elegance of the collar." (Pay attention to where the weight in the collar is distributed in his button-ups made from trickier materials, like velvet.)

"The tension of that arc takes its life from its point of origin in the area of the neck. From there the energy flows quickly and directly, with no margin for error, in a straight line down towards the top button. In this locus is contained the heart and soul of the tailored collar."

1.





2.



1. LEATHER COAT, FW92.

2. BACK OF LEATHER COAT, FW92.

Excellence

CLOSE

More than anything, Yamamoto believes it is a clothing designer's purpose to immerse themselves completely in the vocation—to put the act of creating above all else. "If you want to create something, keep resisting the mediocracy of ordinary things," he once said. "It's a life's work. Are you ready to sacrifice yourself to create something?"

1.



2.



3.





1. SUIT JACKET, SS93.

2. SUIT PANTS, SS93.

3. FULL SUIT, SS93.

Father

CLOSE

When Yohji-san's father Fumio disappeared in combat, the community around the family urged his mother to hold a funeral, for closure. Yet Fumi held out hope that her husband was still alive. It wasn't until three years later, when Yohji-san was four or five, that she finally relented and organized a ceremony to appease the people around her.

"And at that moment, I got so angry with other adults—my anger with society started at that moment," Yamamoto has said. "I said to myself, 'I am not going to join this society. I want to become an outsider or even get into crime.'"

Guitar

CLOSE

Yamamoto is an accomplished guitarist and musician, having put out a handful of solo offerings, including 1991's blues record Well I Gotta Go. Yamamoto also wrote the lyrics and performed the vocals for a briefly active band called the Scum Riders.

The group's drummer, Yukihiro Takahashi, was a member of Yellow Magic Orchestra with the late Ryuichi Sakamoto. Sakamoto, meanwhile, would later write and perform the haunting 35-minute piano overture Bridge used in one of Yamamoto's 1995 shows.

For Yamamoto, the two callings are linked because both require mastering the fundamentals, which creates space for the funny and unexpected; for AW24-25, Yamamoto snuck in a cover of Taylor Swift's "Lover," sung by Yohji himself in a low, menacing growl. It sounds like what would happen if Tom Waits were possessed by the spirit of Jack Antonoff.

"A musician may claim: 'Music is a matter of sensibilities.' However, in order to be widely recognized, he must spend years, perhaps decades, as an unknown while he polishes his craft," he writes in Bomb. "It is the same for a fashion designer, who must fully absorb the most basic techniques if he is to make anything of himself. After all, even a dog requires training."

1.





2.



1. PROMOTIONAL LONG-SLEEVE SHIRT, SS92.

2. BACK OF SHIRT, SS92.

Hat

CLOSE

Yamamoto’s signature fedora is handcrafted by Borsalino, a small Italian atelier. Each year he receives a new hat.

1.



2.



1. COWBOY HAT, FW95.

2. COWBOY HAT, SHOES, AND ACCESSORIES, FW95.

Impermanence

CLOSE



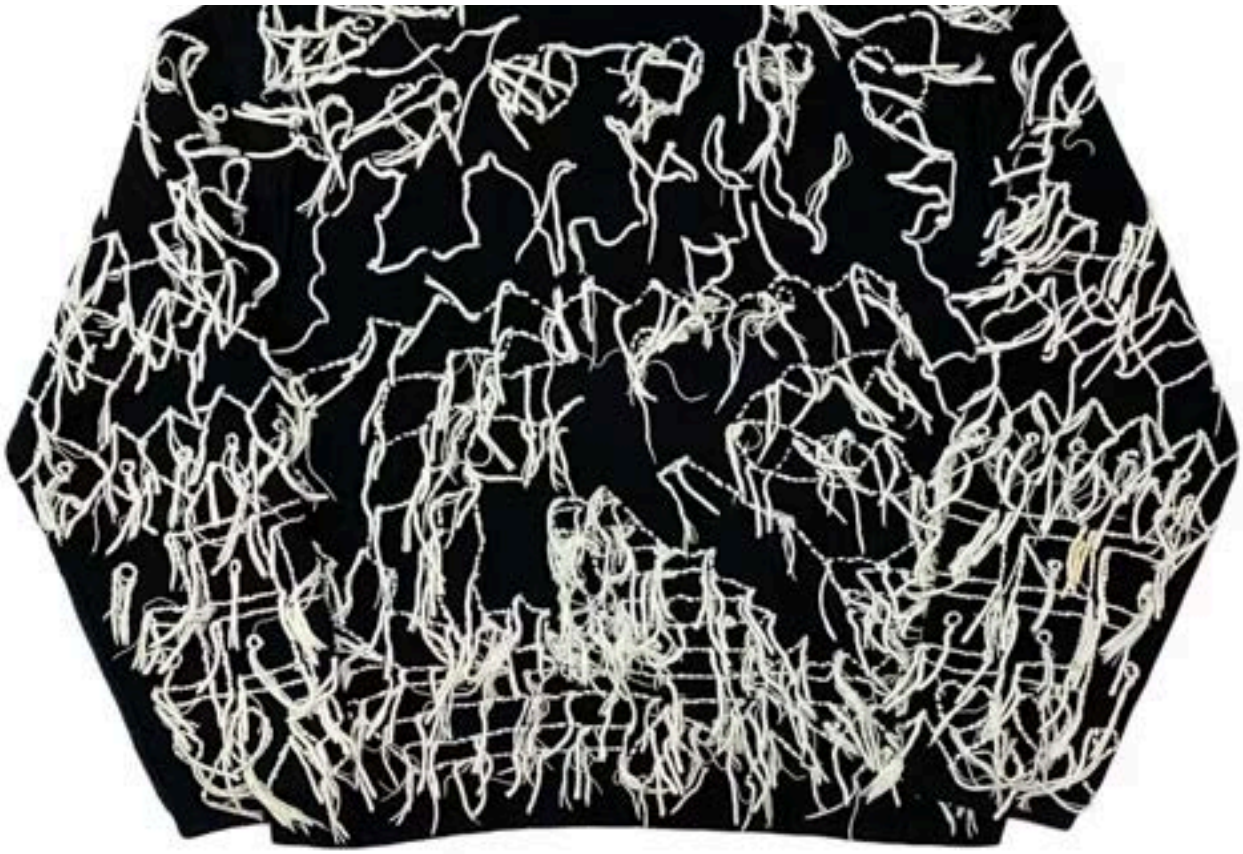


YAMAMOTO AND AZZEDINE ALAÏA ATTEND YAMAMOTO'S SS90 FASHION SHOW IN PARIS. (PHOTO BY PIERRE VAUTHEY/SYGMA/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Yamamoto's mind is preoccupied by existential questions and what it means to live a fulfilling life, especially since many of the designers that he once considered contemporaries—Alexander McQueen, Azzedine Alaïa, Issey Miyake—have died. "How many literary classics can we get through life without reading?" writes Yamamoto, mischievously, in *Bomb*. "Will I die before I have had an affair with another's wife? Wherever I look I find nothing of which I can be proud, so I will take what is there for the taking and gratefully accept the gifts granted by the heavens... Death awaits all men, and this truth is what gives the act of living a special significance." That perspective is what keeps Yamamoto busy, even today, with no signs of slowing down.

1.





2.





3.



1. REVERSIBLE CROCODILE SWEATER, SS93

2. INSIDE OF CROCODILE SWEATER, SS93.

3. BACK OF INSIDE OF CROCODILE SWEATER, SS93.

Japan

CLOSE

After his 1981 debut show in Paris, some members of the French press were left dumbfounded; at least one critic referred to the insurgency of Yamamoto (and Kawaubo by association) as “Hiroshima Chic.” Yamamoto, however, has never felt that his work was specific to his home country: “I didn’t feel that I was Japanese—I’m a Tokyo boy.”

Yamamoto would use that racist characterization as a muse for his later collections, like Autumn-Winter 1986-1987, which played with “the paradox of obsessions with the perfect body” and asked thorny questions about why the West has authority over modern beauty standards. “The obsession with the overall proportions at the expense of everything else is proof of how extensively western aesthetics have poisoned our sensibilities,” he writes in Bomb. “Japanese culture of long ago found beauty in the nape of the neck and in the curve of the back. At some point the sensitivity to the beauty in these things withered, and both men and women became blind to them. I have personally always found the greatest charm in the long, sweeping curve from the ribcage past the waist and down to the hips. It is the most subtle line, curving like a serpent.”

1.





2.



3.



1. SAMPLE OF SUIT JACKET, SS93.

2. SAMPLE OF SUIT PANTS, SS93.

3. SAMPLE OF FULL SUIT, SS93.

Karate

CLOSE

Yamamoto picked up shotokan karate in the early ‘90s, when he, in his telling,

“got tired of making clothes.” His workism was at an all-time high, and he was forgetting to eat, which caused him to become frighteningly frail. “My buttocks had become so bony, simply sitting on an airplane seat became painful,” he wrote. “I knew that was not good, so I took up karate to strengthen my body and mind. Unlike jogging or strength training, karate is a serious competition, and one risks injuring oneself or one’s opponent if one is not careful. I liked that tension.” Eventually, Yamamoto received his black belt under the tutelage of his sensei, Grandmaster Mikio Yahara, whose nickname was “The Leopard.”

1.



2.



1. BOXING SHOES, FW01.

2. BOXING SHOES, FW01.

Limi Feu

CLOSE





LIMI FEU WALKS DURING HER SS08 SHOW IN PARIS. (PHOTO BY CHRIS MOORE/CATWALKING/GETTY IMAGES)

Limi Yamamoto is Yohji-san's daughter from his first marriage, and a talented designer in her own right. After graduating from her family's alma mater of Bunka Fashion College, she cut her teeth working as a pattern cutter for Y's. In 2002, she debuted her own brand within the Yamamoto empire: Limi Feu (or "fire" in French) which shares some of her father's monochromatic and drapey DNA but with harder edges. More scraggly rock n' roll vs. Yohji's atemporal romance.

"I don't know if I should say this... but oh well, I'll just say it. When he designs for women, it depends on his girlfriends at the time," Limi told Vogue in 2008. "But when I design clothes for women, I can try them on and feel the fabric so it's very realistic."

In 2009, Limi Yamamoto won the Fashion Editor's Club of Japan's prestigious

award for designer of the year.

Menswear

CLOSE

Yamamoto introduced his first menswear collection in Paris in 1984, but it wasn't without some creative difficulty. Mostly, that was because his approach to designing clothes for men is a 180 from how he approached womenswear.

"When I am designing women's clothing, I always have a certain goal, or image, or look in mind. I keep my eyes on it as I work, reaching out for it," Yamamoto writes in *Bomb*. "With men's clothing, however, I have no male image on which to focus my gaze."

Instead Yamamoto casts his eyes inward, especially for suiting. Like his womenswear, Yohji's menswear is not exactly workplace appropriate. It's elegant and drapey, almost removed, as if it were designed to help the wearer float above the fray. "My approach to men's clothing is to imagine what I would wear in order to express my current frustrations and thoughts about the world at this present juncture," he writes. "In other words, in the case of men's fashion, the clothing matches my position, oddly eccentric as it may be... I expose my quirky, rebellious self without defending or denouncing it. I simply put it on display."

In the late '90s, Yamamoto found a kindred spirit in director Takeshi Kitano. The pair would collaborate on several films, most notably for the 2000 yakuza flick *Brother*, where the designer's oversized suits would introduce the world to the idea of the Yohji gangster.

1.





2.





3.



4.





1. LEATHER JACKET, FW91.

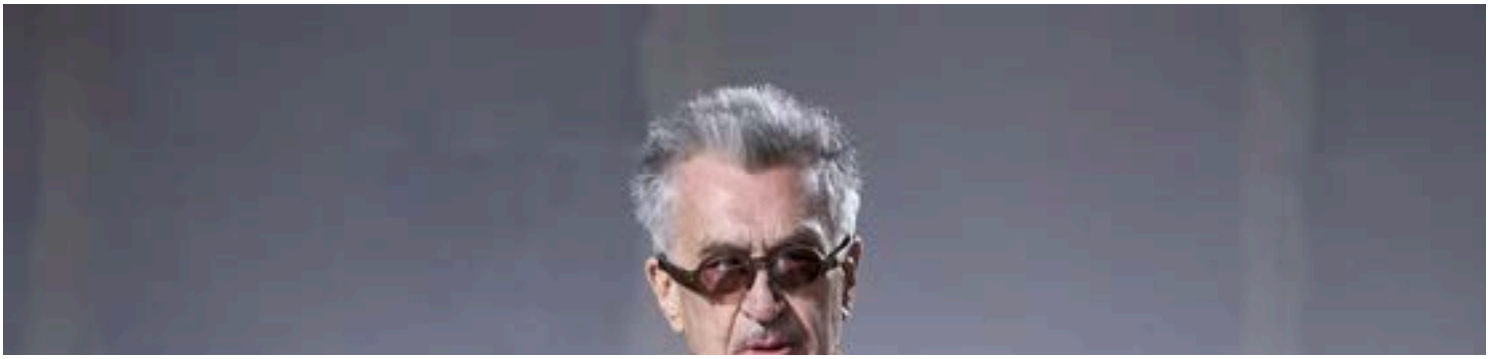
2. BACK OF LEATHER JACKET, FW91.

3. COAT, FW92.

4. BACK OF COAT, FW92.

Notebook on Cities and Clothes

CLOSE





WIM WENDERS WALKS THE RUNWAY DURING THE YOHJI YAMAMOTO FW24 SHOW IN PARIS. (PHOTO BY FRANCOIS DURAND/GETTY IMAGES)

The essential Yohji documentary. The 1989 film is a searching video essay told through the musings of legendary German filmmaker Wim Wenders. He begins the film as a fashion neophyte, skeptical of the concept of designer clothing. By the end, however, Wenders becomes one of Yamamoto's most ardent devotees, as well as a close lifelong friend.

Here, in the film, is how Wenders describes trying on his first Yohji fit:

"From the beginning [the clothes] were new and old at the same time. In the mirror I saw me, of course. Only better. More me than before. And I had the strangest sensation I was wearing—yes, I had no other words for it—the shirt itself and the jacket itself. And in them, I was myself. I felt protected like a knight in his armor."

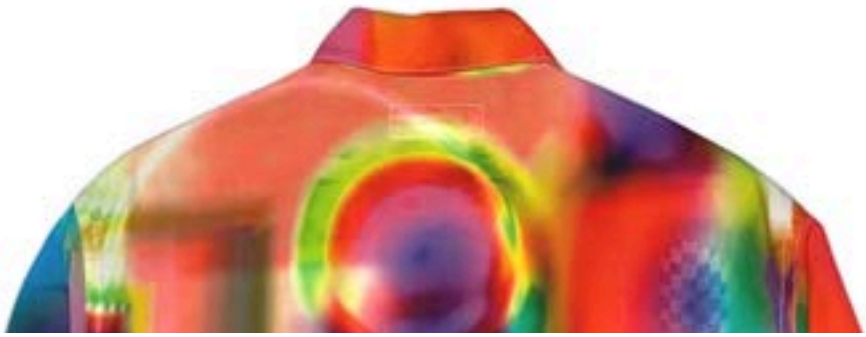
1.



2.



3.





4.





5.



Date: April 16, 2025

RELATED STORIES



DESIGNER COLLEEN ALLEN ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WOMAN IN AMERICA

Fashion | Apr 11



STAGE LEFT, RUNWAY RIGHT

Fashion | Apr 10

NEXT STORY

SKIN CARE ENTERS ITS HYPEROPTIMIZED ERA

The trends, serums, and treatments on the rise for 2025 and beyond. Consider this a skin-care state of the union.