Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons has dramatically influenced the Western perspective on body adornment and the meaning of clothes, as well as the Japanese conception of what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated society. Kawakubo has helped to foster intellectualism in fashion, and her influence can be seen in a wide variety of designers’ collections.

Influenced by

**KEY**
- Japanese philosophy and culture
- fundamental for Kawakubo’s work
- philosophical approach to design
- acceptance of imperfection, impermanence, and imperfection
- nature of the human body
- art as a manifestation of the human body
- cultural influence
- art as a means of communication
- articulation of the human body
- concept of beauty
- philosophical perspective
- cultural context
- historical context
- conceptual approach
- historical influence
- aesthetic approach
- conceptual approach
- cultural influence
- philosophical approach
- conceptual influence
- cultural influence
- philosophical approach
- conceptual influence
- cultural influence
- philosophical approach
- conceptual influence
- cultural influence

**REI KAWAKUBO**

**Japanese**

Born October 11th in Tokyo.

Graduate from Keio University after studying philosophy, literature, and design. Works for a brief time as a stylist.

Despite her having not training in fashion design, Kawakubo started creating women’s clothing at the age of 17, which means “Like Boys.”

Open her first boutique in Tokyo.

Designs her first menswear collection.

**Chronology**

1942

1964

1969

1975

1978

1981

1982

1987

**Inspired by**

- Hussein Chalayan
  - Kawakubo serves as a model for conceptual fashion design.
  - Philosopher and designer known for incorporating abstract ideas.
  - Artistic approach to fashion design.
  - Conceptual fashion design.

- Marc Jacobs
  - Kawakubo has been a major influence on the New York designer.
  - Jacobs has been influenced by the Japanese designer’s approach to fashion design.
  - Artistic approach to fashion design.

- Martin Margiela
  - Margiela’s work is influenced by Japanese designers.
  - Conceptual fashion design.

- Ann Demeulemeester
  - Demeulemeester has been influenced by the Japanese designer’s approach to fashion design.
  - Conceptual fashion design.

- Alexander McQueen
  - British designer known for his conceptual approach to fashion design.

**Fashion is not art**

It may seem that Kawakubo approaches fashion as if it were art—full of experimentation, open-ended questions, and a desire to explore larger issues. However, despite her perceived connection to artistic, conceptual fashion, Kawakubo does not want her work to be considered art for its sake, or as a forerunner function. She states: “Fashion is not art. You sell art to one person. Fashion comes in a series and is more of a social phenomenon. It is also something more personal and individual, because you express your personality. It is an active participation; art is passive.”

Kawakubo’s work has been featured in countless museum collections, exhibitions, and publications, due to the incredible artistic perspective she brings to each of her collections. Her statement that fashion is not art might actually be more of a defensive reaction than a belief, since conceptual designers are continually being forced to prove that their clothing is wearable and approachable, even though it stems from an intellectual approach.

**Surrealism and pop culture**

The piece from the Comme des Garçons Fall 2007 collection includes obvious references to the work of Elsa Schiaparelli, in the form of hands clasping the model’s chest. Schiaparelli collaborated with surrealist artist Jean Cocteau to create a suit with a porcelain head acting as a closure. Kawakubo has also used surrealist elements in her work, such as cartoonish ears, just as Schiaparelli referenced 1930s culture.

**Rei Kawakubo**

I don’t have a definition of beauty. I don’t have an established view of what beauty is, or my idea of beauty keeps changing.”

Rei Kawakubo
**Japanese aesthetic**

Kawakubo is inspired by Japanese culture and symbolism. In this piece from her Autumn 2007 collection, she uses yoseki-inspired make-up on the model’s feet, and the large red sun from the Japanese flag on the clothing.

**Influenced by**

- **Yohji Yamamoto** - Yamamoto was one of Kawakubo’s greatest champions early in her career. He encouraged her to debut with him in Paris, and to create her own path.

- **Issey Miyake** - Miyake was the first Japanese designer to be introduced to the West who also held onto the aesthetics of the East. Miyake has set an example of a designer/artist collaborative, with a steadfast belief in his own personal philosophy which has undoubtedly influenced Kawakubo.

- **Vivienne Westwood** - This two-time designer has influenced each other throughout their careers. Westwood’s early work with Punk movement provided fertile ground for the introduction of Kawakubo’s work to the West.

**Security and strength**

The piece from the Comme des Garçons Fall 2009 collection features the front of a military jacket wrapped over a blanket, symbolic of comfort and warmth. The sheer head covering has a placket off-center; the shoes feature a carefully painted outline of bare toes. Kawakubo seems to be examining the purpose or use of clothing as it represents security and comfort. The collection questions the use of fashion to “protect” and create a sense of identity or strength.

**Security and strength**

- **Archiecture** - Kawakubo is married to an architect, and works very closely with architect Tadao Kawasaki in the development of all her stores (left: Comme des Garçons store in Aoyama, Tokyo). Her designer’s clothing has an architectural feel, as she explores the relationship of the body with the surrounding shell that covers it.

**Inspired by**

- **Fabric sculpture** - For the Comme des Garçons Fall 2007 collection, Junya Watanabe played with the concept of a Western tailored form and organic shapes. The piece here is a sculpture in itself, redefining the face on the fabric and its relationship to the figure. The influence of Rei Kawakubo can be seen in the experimentation of fit and fabrication, and an appreciation of beauty outside the traditional aesthetic.

**SEARCH FOR BEAUTY**

From the start, Kawakubo has questioned several facets of contemporary society in both Japan and the West, namely feminism and the inherent concerns of image and position. Although she is often associated with fellow Japanese designers Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake, she has formulated a philosophy all her own.

**Chronology**

- **1980** - Watanabe said of Kawakubo: “She has taught me everything about how to create.” Kawakubo gave Watanabe funds to start his own collection, but their business relationship does not include advice or input by the more renowned designer. In fact, Kawakubo does not know what Watanabe is doing from season to season. From her, Watanabe has learned to question all established ideas and most importantly, to experiment, letting the results vary and breathe a life of their own. Like her teacher, Watanabe respects concepts and has formulated a philosophy all her own.

- **1995** - H&M, the high street retailer, teams with Junya Watanabe. He becomes a guest designer for the Comme des Garçons SHIRT diffusion line.

- **2008** - Junya Watanabe, Men’s - LVMH, owner of fashion brands Louis Vuitton and Dior, acquires minority shares in the label.

**Japanes TRADITION AND AESTHETIC**

Like her fellow Japanese designers, many of Kawakubo’s aesthetic choices come from traditional Japanese dress, such as the kimono. The kimono is a unisex garment that largely eradicates the erogenous zones highlighted in European dress. The emphasis is on socially defining the person rather than evaluating their body proportions.

Kawakubo often draws upon Japan’s rich craft tradition to experiment with the form of fabric, drape, construction, and deconstruction. Her work also reflects the Japanese aesthetic philosophy wabi-sabi, which refers to accepting both aesthetic choices come from traditional Japanese dress, such as the kimono. The kimono is a unisex garment that largely eradicates the erogenous zones highlighted in European dress. The emphasis is on socially defining the person rather than evaluating their body proportions.

Kawakubo often draws upon Japan’s rich craft tradition to experiment with the form of fabric, drape, construction, and deconstruction. Her work also reflects the Japanese aesthetic philosophy wabi-sabi, which refers to accepting the imperfect, impermanent, or incomplete, and relies on asymmetry and discordance. Unlike feminist philosophies, she questions ideal beauty, such as in her Spring 1997 collection, commonly known as Lumps and Bumps, that showed models with exaggerated shapes and contours all over their bodies. At the same time, Kawakubo often translates aesthetic symbols and ideas from the West, combining or referencing them to form a postmodernist statement.

**Shifting Values**

Comme des Garçons has become a leading fashion house that has shifted the dialogue of female dress, prescribed aesthetic values, and notions of beauty to become a major influence in the fashion industry. All of this influence would be hollow if it were not for the fact that the House is one of the most thriving, independently owned companies, selling successfully not only in Japan but all over the world.