

## LEISURE AND THE ARTS

*Subdued Fashions of Japanese Designer*

By Terry Trucco

TOKYO—Rei Kawakubo enters the room, looking just as one might expect. She is a small woman with blunt-cut hair and no make-up. And she is wearing black.

Young women all over Japan are also wearing black these days, and Miss Kawakubo, who designs fashions sold under the name *Comme des Garçons*, is widely regarded as one of the reasons.

She likes navy blue and dark green, too. Sometimes she designs clothes in shades of gray. But always, always they are somber. "People are beginning to see color in black," she says. "I think the best design statements are made in dark colors."

Not everyone likes "that funeral stuff," as one local fashion critic calls it. But Kawakubo's distinctive style, which blends unusual fabric, roomy construction and dark colors, has made the 39-year-old designer one of the hottest fashion talents in Japan today. Together with Yohji Yamamoto, another young designer fond of dark-colored, loose-fitting clothes, she is perhaps Tokyo's most popular designer of the moment, says Hideko Otake, editor-in-chief of "Ryuko Tsushion," a Japanese fashion monthly.

Last year her company, which features women's wear, men's wear and lounge wear, had a turnover of 500 million yen (about \$2 million). Like many of Japan's top designers, Ms. Kawakubo has also begun to export. Her third Paris show, held last spring, was an enormous success. And her idiosyncratic fashions can be found in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and London, some priced as high as \$400.

Rei Kawakubo is notable for a different reason, however. As president of her company, she is one of Japan's few female entrepreneurs. Though women often find it nearly impossible to reach positions of power and influence in large Japanese corporations or government, fashion is one area where a woman can go straight to the top, provided she has "the talent and confidence," as Ms. Kawakubo puts it.

Hanae Mori, who started business as a modest dressmaker in the 1950s, now commandeers an international fashion empire, with showings in New York, Paris and Tokyo and even a chain of Japanese fashion publications.

A number of other women designers have a significant stake in governing their businesses, including Yoshie Inaba, the affable Yokohama-born woman whose three fashion lines include Bigi, Mo-Ga (short of Modern Gal) and one bearing her own name.

"Being a woman was never a hindrance for me, even when I was starting my business," says Ms. Kawakubo. "Starting out as a designer is just as difficult for a man."

She doesn't enjoy the business aspects,

she adds. Yet she refuses to relinquish these because she "hasn't met anyone I feel I can give those responsibilities to with confidence." It means a long workday — from around 9:15 in the morning to 9 at night. "But I like to feel I am in control," she says.

"No, I'm not married," she adds. "But even if I were to get married, it wouldn't change anything."

Part of the reason women can and do succeed as fashion executives here is because the Western fashion industry is relatively new to Japan. Indeed, men almost always occupy the executive positions in kimono enterprises, which can date back centuries. But Western fashion was introduced with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when Japan again began to trade goods and ideas with the West. And it wasn't until after World War II that Western-style fashion began to dominate.

Perhaps the biggest boost to women designers came with a basic structural upheaval in the fashion industry here which also paralleled Japan's rapid economic growth. For years Japanese women had purchased Western-style clothes from dressmakers, but in the early 1960s *pret-a-porter*, or ready-to-wear suddenly became available here. With scores of newly affluent Japanese women in the market for high-quality clothes, the fashion world embraced the hoards of freshly minted young designers who were then pouring out of Japan's art and design academies.

"It was much easier for me to start out 16 years ago than it would be today," says Ms. Kawakubo.

The times were rich not only in money. "When I started out there were lots of exciting young designers around," she says. "It was a good time to do something daring." Everyone was eager to work hard and take chances, she adds, qualities she fears the current generation of young Japanese may lack.

But the 1960s in Japan was a decade for the adventurous, which is exactly what Rei Kawakubo was. Unlike most designers pro-

minent today, she didn't even go to design school. Instead, she studied philosophy at Tokyo's Keio University. Her first job was with a textile manufacturer. Her next was with a stylist. And when she had saved sufficient money, she and two hearty companions went into the fashion business, calling their enterprise *Comme des Garçons*. "We thought it sounded nice," says Ms. Kawakubo of her firm's curious name.

Since they had little money, they purchased "bruised material," as Ms. Kawakubo puts it — fabric that was either slightly flawed or simple not the proper style and color for the season. "We did a lot with sheeting material," she recalls. "We bought it, dyed it and made it into clothes."

From the beginning, fabric was important to Rei Kawakubo, and she still allows it to determine her designs. "I never make a design until I've seen the fabric," she says. "But I always like loose, free-fitting clothes."

That little business has now grown to include 14 company owned boutiques, 100 sale outlets in department stores and shops and a staff of 120, including 60 people at the company's sleek loft-style headquarters in Tokyo's Omote-sando district. Instead of buying fabric remnants, Ms. Kawakubo now specially commissions fabric from a variety of manufacturers and artisans throughout Japan.

Miss Kawakubo's unusual fashion background is considered one reason for her distinctive style, according to Ms. Otake. Other fashion observers here agree she has a unique sensibility because she never formally studied design.

There are also those who claim the clothes of Ms. Kawakubo and her followers are simply not wearable with their extravagant, outside proportions. Ms. Kawakubo admits her fashions are not for anyone but this is for reasons of attitude rather than fit. "Most women who wear my clothes here in Japan are young, because that is when Japanese women are most free to wear what they want," she says.

In Japan it is expected that married women won't dress as expensively or exuberantly as single women, a constrictor that offends fashion designers here for reasons of both business and personal philosophy. This has also been given as one cause for the new wave of Japanese designers now exporting their clothes.

For her part, Ms. Kawakubo says she is pleased her clothes are now popular in Paris and Los Angeles, but no matter how important she may become internationally, her first consideration, it seems, will be Japan. "I'm not influenced by what is going on in fashion in Paris or New York," she says. "All of my ideas still come from myself."

Terry Trucco is a Tokyo-based writer.

