

Frock coat, ca. 1990s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2006.01.023. Donated by
Karen Mulhallen.



AN ANALYSIS OF A WOMAN'S FROCK COAT BY REI KAWAKUBO

By Jordan Nguyen

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PART ONE

The following object analysis will focus on a black women's frock coat by Rei Kawakubo dating from the early 1990s (FRC2006.01.023). Upon first glance, the garment appears ordinary and minimalistic in its design. The lengthened overcoat bears no features which demand imperative attention, and it seems undistinguishable from current times. It is only upon further examination that one takes note of the subtle details and design choices utilized by the designer. Exploration will reveal Kawakubo's trademarks in fashion creation, her conceptual approach, and her values which link to her sense of self. Placing the garment in its historical context will also trace back to the major impact Kawakubo created in the fashion industry at the time of her arrival in Paris - 1981 - and her continuing influence in design. Japanese design aesthetics, gender neutrality, and feminist interpretations will be discussed.

This analysis has been divided into two posts. The first post will focus on the aesthetics and construction of the garment (the description phase of object-based analysis as per Checklist 1 of [The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion](#)).

The frock coat is made of a black wool fabric with an incorporated gold metallic polyester weave. Kawakubo is noted for creating innovative textiles that combine natural and artificial fibres as well as for using modified production methods (Kawamura 134). A raised diagonal grain is evident in the textile which creates a visual glimmering effect. The fabric is of a heavier weight and holds a crisp edge. The coat's exceptional condition may be attributed to the durability of the wool blend as it shows very few signs of wear. As a whole, the garment appears to have maintained its potent black colour. Kawakubo's design features a two-piece lapel collar, slightly-flared straight sleeves, a welt pocket on the left breast, two flapped pockets on each side of the coat, a back cut-out, and a four-button front closure.

The coat contains several labels: a "Rei Kawakubo" label, a label for "COMME des GARÇONS CO.,LTD." - the name under which Kawakubo's brand was marketed; a tag indicating size medium marked "M"; contents and care tags, and an FRC label. The text on the contents label has visibly faded. It contains both English and French, and its backside also includes Japanese text. Visual symbols are evident which indicate care instructions. It can be noted that although the fabric features a blend of wool and polyester, the tag states that the garment is made of 100% wool. The coat is in pristine condition.

Additional design components are observed on the coat. The collar's left lapel contains an unpierced buttonhole without a corresponding button on the right lapel. The sleeves contain fake plackets which emerge from one of the seams of the sleeves and appears as flaps containing two buttons. Upon lifting the flaps of the side pockets, a button is evident which secures the interior of the pocket closed.

In examining the interior of the coat, the back neck facing contains a band feature above the brand label allowing for it to be hooked on to a hanger. The entire garment is lined in black polyester fabric including the pockets and the sleeves. The center back seam of the lining features a back pleat; this pleat allowance accommodates for freedom of movement in the shoulder area (Bane 300). Hand stitching has been used to clean finish the hem of the garment as well as to secure the lining to the sleeve armholes. In all other areas, machine-stitching has been implemented for efficiency, consistency, and durability.

It is in the examination of the construction and tailoring of the garment that we see traces of the innovative essence of Rei Kawakubo. **Merging traditional techniques and Japanese avant-garde aesthetics, the garment creates an innovative boxy and oversized silhouette while maintaining a semi-fitted form.** The tailoring of the torso is executed with princess lines - "shaped seams which serve the function of darts" (Bane 103). Following the curves of the body, the seams run from the armhole to the hem of the coat. Towards the bottom, the princess lines fold into the flare points of the garment and transition into a less fitted silhouette.



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FRC2006.01.023. Lapel
detail. Donated by Karen
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Complexity is evident in the manner in which the seams coincide with design elements on the coat. The rounded seams of the princess lines are interrupted by a welt pocket on the left breast as well as the flap pockets on the sides. The side seams of the garment also end after they approach the flap pockets from the armhole. This indicates that Kawakubo's design contains many more pattern panels than a traditional overcoat. An additional panel next to the side seams continues the front of the garment to a partial amount on the back before it ends and makes way for perhaps the most interesting feature of the garment - the back cut-out. Creating a long rectangular void, it is clean finished with a yoke and creates the appearance of two panels on the sides of the garment which extend to the front body of the tailcoat.

In considering the sleeves, instead of a singular seam connecting to the side seam of the coat, two seams appear on both sides of where one would normally appear. This innovative construction method allows for shaping in the sleeve's silhouette. The interior lining of the coat reveals the different pieces and panels of the garment based on the seam delineations. Its assembly would have required careful planning in the order of operations when sewn in order to ensure that all of the raw seams would be hidden. Finishings have been applied neatly in consideration of the complex structure of the garment which is disguised in its black entirety.

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PART TWO

In Part I of this analysis, I considered the construction of the frock coat. Part II will offer reflection and interpretation of this garment in terms of Rei Kawakubo's continuing influence in design. Japanese design aesthetics, gender neutrality, and feminist interpretations.

As Kawakubo was never trained as a designer, she was able to envision fashion from an unrestricted perspective and was able to "break the mold of conventions that define a fine quality garment" (Kawamura 134). Her unconventional approach to design required collaboration between herself and her seamstresses who were taught how to sew together complicated pattern pieces and garments (Kawamura 133). This conflicted with traditional standards of construction but nonetheless contributed to the designer's creative design process which challenged her workers. While western styles embraced form-fitting silhouettes that accentuated the contours of the body, Japanese aesthetics rejected this (Kawamura, 137). Kawakubo traces one of her fundamental influences to kimonos which are "geared towards a contourless body" (Kawamura 137). The oversized silhouette of the garment conceals the body in modesty rather than displaying sexuality. This value is evidently seen applied to the length of the frock coat which ends at the knee as well as the narrow depth of the collar.

Western theory suggests that fashion changes in women's dress occur as a result of "shifting erogenous zones" which entails women to uncover different parts of the body selectively in order to attract men" (Tortora et al. 5). The kimono acts adversely, showcasing femininity in an understated demeanor. Kawakubo states that she "designs for strong women who attract men with their minds rather than their bodies" (English 73). With a greater interest in reconstructing proportion, space, and volume (English 76), Kawakubo sought to question the Western fashion formality.

Certain features of the coat design suggest a concurrent theme in Kawakubo's work: gender neutrality. The designer's applied concept of a frock coat to womenswear blatantly rejects the extravagantly feminine and body-conscious fashions of the decade. Kawakubo translated the style into a statement womenswear piece that demonstrates the fluidity of gender as well as challenges gender-specified fashion. **The monochromatic colour of the tailcoat presents the 1990s woman in a new light that defies stereotypical perceptions of women in fashion.** The placement of the cut-out suggests a certain sensuality to the garment but also serves as a paradox to the rest of the garment which embodies a formal and dominant presence. The design was viewed as impractical and unconventional, but the designer had different goals in mind, ones that would launch a new avant-garde view of fashion on the restricted and traditional 1980s Paris stage.

The boxy and oversized silhouette of the tailcoat induced radical criticism in response to the masculine figuration it created which was not embraced in the period. The tailcoat features large shoulder pads which broaden the dimension of the garment (See Figure 16). Its front closure is "buttoned from left to right, *comme des garçons*" (Fukai et al. 161), which conflicts with traditional closures on women's clothing. Kawakubo's work was seen as a form of anti-fashion when it was introduced to the Paris runways, and the concepts of minimalism, intended imperfection in design, spontaneity, reconstruction, and deconstruction in design seemed foreign and inaccessible. **The spaciousness of the garment was also an unfamiliar aspect in comparison to other fashions of the period.** Kawakubo considered the functional quality of the garment and created a fit that would accommodate for movement and ease. This consideration is linked to the practical importance of kimonos in which they were worn to live in. Their genderless appearance and equated elements of design are associated with the unisex nature of Kawakubo's designs. The designer once mentioned, "it is the space between the fabric and the body that is most important" (English 72). Her directives and influences in fashion were much different than those of other designers who presented at Paris fashion week. Kawakubo's approach to womenswear blurred the lines of gender and sexuality in an industry that was quick to mark gender difference (Entwistle 135), and denote what constituted as high-fashion.

The issues that the Japanese feminist movement brought to attention factored into the influences that Kawakubo used to redefine women through her visual conceptions. The movement sought for emancipation and equality between genders in terms of education and employment. Efforts were made to advance women's studies as well as counter the sexism apparent in the mass media (English 69). From changing "women's consciousness of themselves as women...to seeking visible changes in social institutions" (English 69), feminism was calling for reform in societal perceptions and regulations. **In her designs, Kawakubo commented on the Western representation of the body and its concept of sartorial beauty.** Fashion's seemingly superficial image was confronted by the psychologically complex creations of the Japanese designer who implemented meaning and narrative into her work. Kawakubo uses fashion as a means to propel women into states of independence, dignity and strength.



Frock coat, ca. 1990s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2006.01.023. Sleeve detail. Donated by Karen Mulhallen.

The designer claimed, "fashion design is not about revealing or accentuating the shape of a woman' body, its purpose is to allow a person to be what they are" (Kawamura 137). The black frock coat extends beyond a fashionable garment in the way that it reflects these powerful qualities in a woman of fashion. This is a matter of encloded cognition in which clothing influences the way people feel and act in reponse to the "symbolic meaning of the dress and the physical experience of wearing that dress item" (Johnson et al. 28). This intuitive approach of implementing meaning into fashion was seen as avant-garde. A term commonly associated with the designer, Kawakubo's work complied with its three qualities in definition: work such that "redefines artistic conventions, utilizes new artistic tools and techniques, and refines the nature of the art object" (Kawamura 130). **In the innovative design and construction of the garment, its use of an experimentally produced gold-polyester-wool-fused textile, along with its mindful and historical associations, Kawakubo's tailcoat can be classified as an avant-garde garment from the 1990s.**

Upon my analysis of the garment in the Toronto Metropolitan University FRC, the tailcoat seemed to evoke a sense of mystery. **I felt a tension between hard austerity and delicate fragility while examining the design. It was an emotional response and led me to research about the designer's background and historical influences which contributed to its creation.**



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FRC2006.01.023. Label.
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Kawakubo was born on October 11, 1942 in the post-war period. It was a time when Japan was beginning to emerge beyond the destruction of its country. Due to the colonization by Americans, many Japanese traditions of life were discarded. Instead of opting to modernize traditional Japanese dress, natives were forced to adapt to more Western ideals of fashion. Kawakubo's work incorporates stylistic influences from traditional Japanese fashion with efforts to "re-instill a respect for traditional cultural traits" (English 69). Such can be noted in the silhouette of select designs which replicate or are based on the kimono. The tailcoat embodies this quality in its boxy, loose-fitting, and flared figure.

The modern appearance of Rei Kawakubo's black tailcoat from the 1990's to the current era is no coincidence. The designer captured the zeitgeist, "spirit of the times" (Tortora et al. 7) much earlier than other designers could have foretold. Oversized and boxy silhouettes have seemed to become a global trend and is celebrated widely today as an alternative look to stereotypically feminine fashion styles. **Kawakubo paved the way for further experimentation with gender-neutral dress and creativity in design.** Her shows continue to shock fashion press, and her designs leave fashion experts puzzled and perplexed. In continuing to reinvent the future of fashion at the age of 74, Kawakubo states, "we must break away from conventional forms of dress for the new woman of today" (Mears, 100). Her influence in the world of fashion is undeniable and just as the black tailcoat created a radical impact in the early 1980s, her innovative creations continue to challenge the conventions of beauty and design.

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