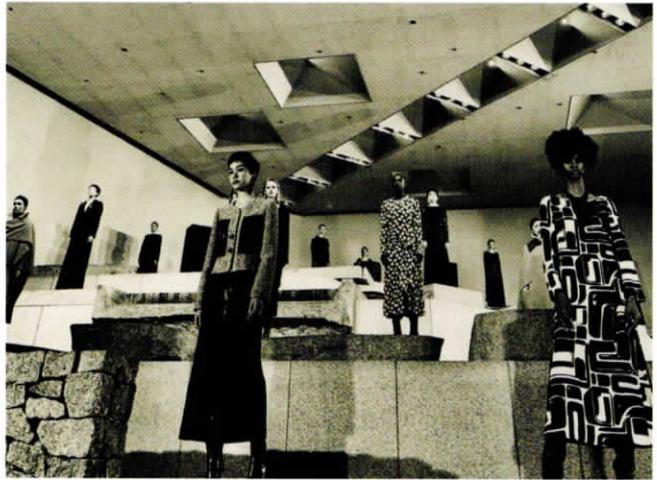


## Amplifying Values

by Kaori Nakano



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The Jun Ashida Autumn Winter 2019-2020 Collection debuted not as the usual runway show but as a live installation solely for buyers and the press, staged in the two-story Isamu Noguchi stone garden within Sogetsu Plaza. Twenty-five models took their places on the various levels of the space, followed by the guests, who could walk among the models and view the collection at close range and from all directions. A live musical performance by Keiichro Shibuya amplified the mysterious sense of the integration of the collection and its viewers.

The collection was directed by Tae Ashida, delighting the eye with a modernistic curve ball while preserving the hallowed style of Jun Ashida's consistent pursuit of luxury and elegance. This new way of presenting the collection clearly communicated the message of the brand's successful transmission from one generation to the next. While of course the new creations were all bewitching in their own right, it was even more moving to see the commitment of the new director to taking on new challenges while carrying on the tradition of the house's superb craftsmanship and the spirit of its founder.

At around the same time as the collection's debut, I went to an exhibition of bonbonnières, where I experienced a similar feeling. Bonbonnières are small,

palm-sized candy boxes that are presented as gifts by the imperial household on celebratory occasions, such as the enthronement of an emperor or imperial marriages or births. They contain delicate, traditional confections, but their most conspicuous feature is the high level of design and craftsmanship they exhibit.

The custom of presenting bonbonnières began after the government's 1876 decree abolishing the wearing of swords. As a result of the decree, the artisans who had produced the decorative metalwork and ornaments adorning traditional Japanese swords were suddenly out of a job. In an effort to preserve this tradition of craftsmanship and pass it on to future generations, the imperial household arrived at the idea of commissioning bonbonnières from the decorative metalworkers. Bonbonnières were really nothing more than a means of preserving this traditional craft, masked as a "need" for small candy boxes. I was deeply moved when I learned of this background, less by the undeniable loveliness of the objects themselves than by the commitment of the imperial household to guarantee the preservation and survival of a traditional craft.

I was also reminded of Chiso, the renowned Kyoto firm founded in 1555 and dedicated to producing beautiful kimono in the Kyoto *yuzen* style. Some years ago, I enjoyed the privilege of exploring the firm's

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archives, and made an astonishing discovery that stands out clearly in my memory to this day—a half-kimono, never meant to be worn.

On July 7, 1940, as the Japanese government was about to launch the nation into war, it issued a decree regulating the production and sale of luxury goods. With the demand for luxurious *yuzen* kimonos drying up, in 1943 Chiso was given permission to produce luxury goods as an “authorized preserver of traditional crafts.” This didn’t change the fact that there was no demand for their kimonos, or that due to war-time shortages, they had no silk to produce them. In its severely reduced circumstances, the company decided to continue producing just the bottom half of kimonos. These were not for sale, existing solely to prevent the disappearance of the artisan’s skills. Covered with the finest embroidery, these half-kimonos were a means to practice one’s skills—comparable, in the art of music, to Liszt’s *Transcendental Études* for piano practice. They symbolize the determination to transmit traditional crafts to future generations, by whatever means necessary—a commitment that still moves me deeply when I think about it.

When times change radically and generations shift, naturally the things sought after also change. Nevertheless, the high-level craftsmanship and aesthetic sense that are the pillars of artisanship represent the quintessence of human skill and ingenuity, and we must not allow their value to be lost. As we have seen, there are people who understand this and make it their mission to transmit those skills to the future, pondering how to accomplish this successfully, employing all their ingenuity and occasionally making sacrifices to see it through. That passionate commitment, transcending time and space, is deeply moving, while at the same time containing hints for future innovations.

The attempt to preserve the craft of decorative metalwork in the form of bonbonnières is not the only example of such a strategy. When the age of the horse carriage was coming to an end, the skills of saddlers and harness makers were redeployed to build the foundation of luxury bag brands. Two brothers who inherited a water-driven milling plant repurposed it into a metal-rolling plant and, with that technology,

created the coffee mill, as well as steel-hoop crinolines, the undergarment that expanded women’s skirts in the nineteenth century to their bell-like shape. When crinolines went out of fashion, they redeveloped the same skills to manufacture sewing machines, bicycles, and automobiles. Though individual products may come and go, the commitment to preserving the legacy of skill and technique leads to technological innovation.

The recent live installation was an innovation in the mode of presenting a collection. A brand is not passed on by making the same products and presenting them in the same way as in the past. It is accomplished by preserving and transmitting the *values* created by the founder—the craftsmanship and aesthetic vision, and the people, the artisans who fashion the product. As long as the commitment to understanding the essence of those values and transmitting it to the future remains central, innumerable “amplifications” of the means of their expression are possible.

This realization was very thought provoking. My training has always been in the humanities, which today are often regarded as outmoded. But the core values of the humanities, which the human race has preserved for millennia, must certainly survive unchanged. I feel I have received a beacon of hope that perhaps those values can be transmitted to the next generation through this process of amplification.

## KAORI NAKANO

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Completed her undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Tokyo, followed by a period as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, and as a specially appointed professor at the School of Global Studies, Meiji University. In addition to authoring columns and series appearing in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and other media, Kaori Nakano is active in a wide variety of arenas as a lecturer, consultant, and copy editor transcending the boundaries of art, media, and business, and is the author of several books, including *The Gentleman's World Through Fifty Masterpieces* (Shogakkan), *The Lineage of Dandyism: Men Admired by Other Men* (Shinchosha), and to be published in June 2019, *Royal Style: A History of the British Royal Family Through Fashion* (Yoshikawa Kobun Kan).

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