



**Alexander McQueen olhando para  
o Oriente – influência do kimono  
japonês no Ocidente e elementos  
orientalistas na coleção “Voss” de  
McQueen (Primavera/Verão 2001)**

*Alexander McQueen looking at the East – Influence of  
Japanese kimono on the West and Orientalist elements in  
McQueen’s (Spring/Summer 2001) “Voss” collection*

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[abstract] Since the beginning of the trade between Japan and the West in 1853, the kimono and other oriental garments flooded the Western market. Designers started incorporating the kimono and its elements into their design, therefore, bringing newness to the kind of static decade of Western fashion. There were two different approaches fashion designers used toward exotic garments: some would see just costumes and others would try to preserve the original work. This paper intends to analyze the work of the British designer Alexander McQueen who belongs to the second group, in other words, designers who created modern garments while still trying to keep the traditional aspects of the culture from which they borrowed. An example of the second approach would be McQueen's (Spring/Summer 2001) "Voss" collection with which he also challenged the concept of beauty. Nature plays an integral part in this collection, but also worth mentioning are the elements of the East, especially Japan. McQueen was one of these designers who did borrow the elements of the countries of the Orient while also preserving the original craftsmanship. When it comes to Japan, in particular, McQueen used Japanese screens with embroidered panels for the creation of the dress. Interestingly, the original Japanese design and craftsmanship were preserved but transformed into something nostalgic and also new.

[keywords] **Alexander McQueen. Fashion. Kimono. Orientalism. Nature.**

[resumo] Desde o começo das trocas entre o Japão e o Ocidente em 1853, o *kimono* e outras peças orientais inundaram o mercado ocidental. Designers começaram a incorporar o *kimono* e seus elementos em seus designs, além disso, trazendo novidades para décadas de certa forma estáticas na moda ocidental. Há duas abordagens que os designers de moda costumam usar em relação às peças exóticas: alguns vêm apenas trajes, enquanto outros tentam preservar o trabalho original. Esse artigo objetiva analisar o trabalho do designer britânico Alexander McQueen, o qual pertence ao segundo tipo de abordagem. Em outras palavras, designers que criaram peças modernas, ao mesmo tempo em que tentaram manter aspectos tradicionais da cultura na qual se inspiram. Um exemplo dessa abordagem é a coleção "Voss" de McQueen (primavera/verão 2001), na qual ele também desafiou o conceito de beleza. A natureza desempenha uma parte integral dessa coleção mas, além disso, vale mencionar os elementos oriundos do Oriente, especialmente do Japão. McQueen foi um desses designers que tomavam emprestados elementos de países orientais, mas preservando o trabalho manual original. Sobre o Japão, em particular, McQueen usou telas japonesas com painéis bordados para a criação dos trajes. De maneira interessante, o design e o trabalho manual japonês original foram preservados, porém transformados em algo nostálgico e também novo.

[palavras-chave] **Alexander McQueen. Moda. Kimono. Orientalismo. Natureza.**

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## Introduction

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, the kimono and other “exotic” garments had become an integral part of the wardrobes of aristocratic women. It was seen as new and different from the clothes that were worn before the exchange between the West and Japan began. This sensibility persisted almost unchanged into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; fashion designers for big brands gladly drew inspiration from the East, especially when they were out of ideas for the next collection and the deadline was drawing near. There were two different approaches fashion designers used towards exotic garments: some would look and see just costumes, and some would acknowledge the culture from which the inspiration was borrowed, with the aim of preserving the essence of the original work. Looking at one culture’s traditional dress and seeing it as a costume, which involved seeing the other culture as something less compared to one’s own culture, is an Orientalist view. This paper will talk about one designer that looked at other cultures for inspiration and tried not to view them as something less than his own culture, and who while preserving the original craftsmanship – transformed traditional garments into something new thereby challenging the concept of beauty: Alexander McQueen. While including aspects from China, Japan, and other nations in his “Voss” collection for Spring/Summer 2001, McQueen also made an effort to avoid viewing those cultures through an Orientalist lens.

## Japanese traditional dress

[Kimono], “a thing worn”, are straight-seamed garments constructed with a minimal cutting from a single bolt of cloth, worn wrapped around the body, and secured with a waist sash called an obi.<sup>2</sup> This method of styling serves to mostly hide the body. In contrast, the Western vision of the dress had an entirely different concept; it was about exposing the curves of the body and the garment being pressed to the skin, sometimes even breaking the barrier between the body and clothes where, as a result, we have a deformed silhouette. Japanese kimono serves as a cover, with the space left between the garment and the body to allow the body to breathe. This completely different aesthetic came to be seen as very alluring in the West and was immediately adopted and even preferred over more familiar designs because of both the newness it possessed and the different approach it represented when it came to the relationship between skin and garment.<sup>3</sup>

The kimono can be seen as a simple garment when compared to Western dress. However, this garment achieves its complexity “through colour and pattern,” by means of which we can identify a person’s position in society, age, etc.<sup>4</sup> All of this created a lot of interest in

<sup>2</sup> Anna Jackson and Clarie Wilcox. *Alexander McQueen*, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Martin and Koda, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Jackson and Clarie Wilcox. *Alexander McQueen*, p. 117.

the West, and after Japan was forced to open its borders to the rest of the world in 1853, the cultural exchange began in earnest. The kimono in Western eyes was perceived as something “exotic” even among many other textiles and forms of clothing from different cultures. This fascination with faraway cultures was part of the overall Western attitude towards the East, which is generally defined as Orientalism, “the historical term used to describe the West’s fascination with and assimilation of the ideas and styles of the East.”<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, Orientalism encompasses more than that; in Said’s book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, the term is used to explain the characteristics of the West’s perception of the East. “The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.”<sup>6</sup> The idea of the East as something exotic, mysterious, and different from the West in many regards has found its place in many works of art, literature, science, and inevitably fashion. This has led to a stereotypical and somewhat superficial view of Eastern cultures. The fascination with the kimono, the topic of this particular paper, is yet just one of the aspects of this larger cultural phenomenon called Orientalism. The West typically took the traditional clothes of Eastern countries and adapted them to its own liking. Since this adaption was based upon subjective notions, one result was “exotic” clothes understood condescendingly. “Orientalism always challenges the Western mind: it is Orientalism that makes Western culture incomplete and that the West uses to see itself as a whole.”<sup>7</sup>

Artists from the West began traveling to faraway lands in search of something that would stimulate their imagination, like French painter Eugène Delacroix (“The Women of Algiers in their Apartment”, 1834) whose attention to the Orient was drawn by Lord Byron’s work, and who then traveled to North Africa in 1832 to see more “primitive” culture.<sup>8</sup> Since there was nothing new to add to the academic style of painting, Western artists struggled to produce something innovative, and people believed that Western traditions had become stale. Delacroix observed that Lord Byron’s visits to Africa gave him fresh subjects and inspired him to explore cultures other than his own. This resulted in an exoticized portrayal of submissive and seductive Algerian women in his artwork. After experiencing a different culture, individuals like Byron and Delacroix realized that there is a vast array of fresh subjects and things to paint and write about. They, therefore, realized that the West did not give them a full range of sources to investigate; there is more, and that is the East. The painters

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5 Term established by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Martin and Koda, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress*, p. 7.

6 Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*, p. 5.

7 Ibid, p. 9.

8 Eugène Delacroix, *Recollections of a Moroccan journey*: “They have, [...], and this is their chief attraction, small naked white feet, barely covered by pointed slippers; these, which are open at the back, reveal their delightful pink heels. When they are at home, they abandon these little shoes and those charming feet tread freely on carpets or matting. The lower part of their legs is adorned by very broad silver anklets which embellish his bare flesh and draw attention to it in a most graceful manner.” (Gérard-Georges Lemaire. *Orientalism: The Orient in Western Art*, p. 209).



began to change their perspective and understanding of other cultures in order to uncover the beauty that was worthwhile painting and writing about because the same types of beauty that emerge from the West have been researched and depicted repeatedly. The luxurious interior of “The Women of Algiers in their Apartment,” which is rich in textiles and vibrant in colors, can be linked to the second chapter of Edward Said’s “Orientalism” and the shift in the West’s perception of the Orient. This painting is a representation of the romanticized view of the East; the Orient was portrayed as a land of boundless happiness and well-being in a variety of literary and artistic works.<sup>9</sup>

Some, however, would try to neglect their native selves and identities and strive to become a part of the new one; to become a native of the new land. That attitude is exemplified through wearing that country’s clothes, eating its food, and behaving as much like its people as possible. A well-known example is the writer T. E. Lawrence, who served in the British army in Arabia during WWI, who came into contact with a foreign culture and learned to comprehend it more deeply than most others. He discovered and located what the West considered to be an inferior culture, then came to think of it as equivalent or superior to that of the West. He ultimately adopted a critical posture towards practically all of what the West had concluded about Arab culture.<sup>10</sup> Even though the West saw itself in a higher position than the East, the tendency for constant improvement was still present; all for the sake of establishing the greater gap between these “different” cultures.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the moment the West began adopting Eastern clothing, even if just a condescending version of the original, these two parts of the world entered into coexistence. Now, no one can imagine Western dress without the East in the fashion world. “Orientalism is not the picture of the East or the Easts. It represents longing, option, and faraway perfection. It is, like Utopia, a picture everywhere and nowhere, saved in the imagination.”<sup>12</sup> Orientalism creates a vision of hard-to-reach lands, places with unlimited treasures, and a limitless source of ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Japan pursued its strategy of self-isolation during the Edo period (1603 to 1868) and had relatively little contact with Western culture. While carefully controlled lines of interaction were in fact maintained between Japan and the West at this time, Japan generally had little familiarity with Western culture. Therefore, unlike other Eastern countries, it came to the West suddenly. Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was seeking something fresh, never seen before, which is why all manner of things Japanese were quickly adopted. But this exchange did not go only in one direction; even as Japanese goods and motifs flooded the Western market,

<sup>9</sup> Allan Massie. *Byron’s Travels*, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> T. E. Lawrence. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Orientalism served as the justification for Western attitudes toward the East. Seen as superior to the East, it was the duty of the West to guide the countries of the Orient. This Western attitude towards the East was explained at the beginning of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978).

<sup>12</sup> Martin and Koda, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> This shift in Western attitude towards the East is explained in the second part of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978).

the Japanese were adopting Western dress and conceptions of modernity. Compared to the situation in the West, however, Japan while welcoming new notions of fashionableness and different styles of clothing found a balance with its native traditions. A prime example is the Rokumeikan (“Banqueting House”), a formal location created by the Japanese government in the 1880s to promote interaction between Japanese and foreigners. The rule on the Japanese side was that, when going to Rokumeikan, it was essential that Western-style dresses be worn. When they were outside that space, they could maintain Japanese dress, especially when it comes to Japanese women and children. Overall, Rokumeikan was viewed as a representation of Japan’s modernization and assimilation of Western culture.<sup>14</sup> However, the new clothing was particularly problematic for Japanese women, “as the brief period when foreign dresses were copied most assiduously, from 1887 until about 1889, corresponded in America and Europe with the height of the bustle style, which represented an extreme deviation from the natural shape of the body” with the clothing, unlike with the kimono, crushing the boundaries between the physical body and garment, resulting in deformed figures and a lot of sacrifices.<sup>15</sup> In the West, this was not as much of a concern. As far as clothing was concerned, with the appearance of Ballets Russes (between 1909 and 1929) and Poiret’s Oriental style of clothing, the West was ready to give up its own dress and embrace change.<sup>16</sup> This is not surprising, however, when one considers how the Western style of the dress has gone through various transformations, and the degree to which newness has frequently been the element greatest valued.

For the West at this time, Japan was an enigma. “The paradox for the West has always been the coexistence of warrior violence and hara-kiri with gentle aestheticism, of Edo and a Floating World with Kyoto and moss gardens of serenity, and of Kabuki’s extravagance with the cryptic stylization of Noh.”<sup>17</sup> All of these examples just enhanced the Western craving for all things Japanese. Japan was a great inspiration to Western artists like Édouard Manet (“Portrait of Émile Zola”, 1868) and Vincent van Gogh (“Portrait of Père Tanguy”, 1887). Édouard Manet and Vincent van Gogh, who famously produced work at this time, clearly show the elements borrowed from Japanese visual tradition in their creation. For example, Manet’s “Portrait of Émile Zola” is notable for its use of flat, and abstract form which is clearly inspired by the traditional Japanese woodblock prints (ukiyo-e), that were popular in Europe in the 19th century. Van Gogh’s “Portrait of Père Tanguy” is painted with bold brushstrokes and vibrant colors against a background of Japanese woodblock prints. The Neo-pure Impressionism’s contrasting complementary colors, as well as the flat picture

<sup>14</sup> Mami Harano. *Anatomy of Mishima’s Most Successful Play Rokumeikan*, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Toby Slade. *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Kiwa Nakanishi. *Orientalism in the works of Ballets-Russes and Fashion – Comparison with Orientalism in (the) dress of Paul Poiret*, p. 18-20. Ballet Russes introduced faraway cultures with new color palettes and new forms of clothing that were loose around the waist, like Poiret’s design. The difference between the two was that Poiret’s designs did not have stage-like garments – instead, we have new forms of dresses with exotic colors which would be the influence of Orientalism portrayed by Western painters that visited the countries of the Orient.

<sup>17</sup> Martin and Koda. *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress*, p. 74.

space, are indebted to both Impressionism and Japanese art.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this cultural exchange, a new style, known as Japonisme, emerged and laid the foundation for modern art of the 20th century.

The influence soon spread to fashion, which resulted in designers like Paul Poiret (Oriental style of clothing, loose silhouette, new color palette – an example would be “Sorbet” gown from 1913), Madeline Vionnet (adaptation of kimono sleeves and other elements borrowed from the East to Western dress, loose silhouette – an example would be “Evening gown” from 1932), Cristobal Balenciaga (“Day dress” from 1955-56 inspired by kimono collar, “Evening ensemble” from 1962, moss green Indian sari silk with woven gold trim), Yves Saint Laurent (“Evening ensemble”, fall/winter 1976-77 – red silk chiffon with gold stripes, green silk faille), etc.<sup>19</sup> If we look at more recent examples, such as the work of John Galliano, who sought ideas for collections in the past, it becomes clear that this influence never stopped, nor does it seem to have slowed down. One case in point would be Galliano’s 1984 MA graduation collection in which the models wore Kabuki-like makeup, and “huge kimono-like coats over soft, ample pajamas.”<sup>20</sup>

Although perceived as a simple garment, the kimono features many elements that were incorporated into Western fashion. Attention was also paid to the shoes traditionally worn with kimono, zori, and geta (with geta being used for less formal occasions). An example of this influence would be “Lanvin’s dress with bolero jacket of about 1934, which simulates kimono sleeves, has a perspective of Japanese sensibility distilled by Western modernity.”<sup>21</sup> Using the traditional elements of another culture and incorporating them into something fresh for the fashion scene carried with it a feeling of modernity which was much needed in Western fashion at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when designers were struggling to create something new.<sup>22</sup>

With this transformation of Western dress, the boundary between the body and the garment changed: the new silhouette seemed more relaxed and allowed freer movement through space. Since the opening of the trade between Japan and the Western world in 1853, the kimono has never stopped influencing new forms of clothing. Japanese designers, too, have been using their own traditional cultural elements, especially those borrowed from the kimono, in order to create universally-appealing clothes that transcend gender and status. Does this mean that the kimono is the future? Well, it seems we need to wait to find that out.

<sup>18</sup> The Art Story, Japonism.

<sup>19</sup> More about the influences the East had on Western designers can be read here: Martin and Koda. *Haute Couture*.

<sup>20</sup> Dana Thomas. *Gods and Kings: The Rise and Fall of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Martin and Koda. *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Martin and Koda. *Bare Witness: Clothing and Nudity*, p. 9.

## Translating Japanese Dress into Alexander McQueen's Vision

Fashion designers over the years have played with the silhouette of the kimono, presenting different versions of it on the catwalk. Nowadays, the use of other people's culture is considered very questionable, with many brands being called out for "cultural appropriation". However, just a few years ago, when the internet and related technologies were still being developed, this idea of incorporating elements from faraway countries seemed natural.

Alexander McQueen, known for his innovative and boundary-pushing designs, which are criticized by some, but overall celebrated by the majority, incorporated also Japanese elements that are a reflection of his curiosity when it comes to exploring different cultures. One of the ways in which McQueen translated the traditional elements of the Japanese dress into something modern was that he used the looseness of the kimono to alter the silhouette, thus creating a sense of movement. Additionally, asymmetry, which is a key component of traditional Japanese aesthetics, was also used often by McQueen. Examples can be seen in uneven hemlines, one-shoulder designs, and off-center closures. The incorporation of the elements of Japanese dress and its alternation that transformed the garment into something innovative also led to the coexistence of the two countries in the showpieces. The question is – how much of that other county was its truth and how much was it a product of McQueen's interpretation of the country is left to be judged separately.

Elements of the East are incorporated in many of McQueen's collections. For example, "the tall, double-heeled backless shoes featured in "La Dame Bleue" (Spring/Summer 2008), derived from the geta, a form of traditional Japanese footwear."<sup>23</sup> Geta could reach a height of 20-30cm, requiring the silhouette of the wearer to move in a kind of slow motion, allowing viewers an opportunity to consume its details and also appreciate the wearer's beauty.

McQueen's fascination with the Orient did not only manifest in footwear: the referencing of kimono elements and styles takes part in a lot of McQueen's work, whether in "elaborate embroidery, elongated sleeves, obi-like waist devices, or v-shaped collars drawn back from the body – in the style of Edo-period courtesans – to reveal the nape of the neck, which in Japan is considered the most erogenous zone."<sup>24</sup> Examples would include the "Scanners" collection (Autumn/Winter 2003), which portrays a journey across Siberia and Tibet that culminates in Japan ("as McQueen selected sartorial symbols to tie his narrative together, the aesthetic connection he made between Tibet and Japan may have been informed by both his career-spanning affinity for Japanese dress and his adoption of Buddhism"<sup>25</sup>), and "It's Only a Game" (Spring/Summer 2005), which took the form of a chess match on stage between Japan and America. The "Voss" collection (Spring/Summer 2001) is also useful here: this collection, apart from the elements of nature, art, and beauty, incorporated elements borrowed from the East.

<sup>23</sup> Helen Persson and Clarie Wilcox. *Alexander McQueen*, p. 111.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Jackson and Clarie Wilcox. *Alexander McQueen*, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Lee Alexander McQueen, Clarissa M. Esguerra, Michaela Hansen. *Lee Alexander McQueen: Mind, Mythos, Muse*, p. 67.



Overall, it appears that McQueen's collections are not a simple representation of the countries from the far East; rather, McQueen's intention was the exploration of the themes and motifs present in that culture. In addition to other elements, McQueen's use of the kimono silhouettes in the "Voss" collection can be seen as a commentary on the Western gaze on Eastern culture and the exoticization of the East which brings us back to the term Orientalism and its complexities. On the other hand, unlike the designers that treat the elements from the East as costumes, McQueen's use of motifs and traditional techniques (embroidery) and their preservation demonstrates how much respect he had for other countries' cultures. He treated these elements with care and respect, preserving the original craftsmanship while also creating something innovative for the fashion scene. Nevertheless, these garments were the product of McQueen's perception and understanding of the East which occasionally sparked debate and criticism from his audience.

### Alexander McQueen's "Voss" collection (Spring/Summer 2001)

"I wanted to be honest about the world that we live in", said McQueen, "and sometimes my political persuasions come through my work. Fashion can be really racist, looking at the clothes of other cultures as costumes. That's mundane and it's old hat. Let's break down some barriers."<sup>26</sup> As noted, McQueen was unique in his way of doing shows, and sometimes a collection would incorporate more than 300 references. The "Voss" collection was no exception. As Tom Rasmussen declared, "If any show cemented McQueen as the king of fashion theatre, it was Voss."<sup>27</sup>

Alexander McQueen, like John Galliano, "revered craftsmanship and revived historical looks and techniques."<sup>28</sup> But, unlike Galliano, McQueen tended to preserve and take ideas from the old and mix them with the new and innovative. When it comes to the Eastern elements we find in the "Voss" collection, they appeared in various forms, from jackets to trousers and coats, "where crystals and embroidered plants turned grey wool into a living garden."<sup>29</sup> Obis, floral motifs, layered textures, and kimono silhouettes are some of the elements McQueen borrowed from Japan for this particular collection. My intention is to go into more detail about how McQueen's use of these components in his design can be seen as demonstrating his fundamental regard for the native culture in the part that follows.

Obi is a sash that is paired with a Japanese kimono. It is tied around the waist to secure the kimono while also emphasizing the waist. It can be embellished with embroidery and other decorative elements, and it comes in a variety of styles and materials. This particular aspect is frequently perceived by Westerners as a symbol of the exotic and sensuous

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Bolton. *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty (Fashion Studies)*, p. 130.

<sup>27</sup> Tom Rasmussen. *McQueen: The Illustrated History of the Fashion Icon*, p. 128.

<sup>28</sup> Ana Finel Honigman. *What Alexander McQueen Can Teach You About Fashion*, 2021, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Ana Finel Honigman. *What Alexander McQueen Can Teach You About Fashion*, 2021, p. 125.

culture of Japan. This element is used in several ways in the “Voss” collections, including looks fourteen, forty-nine, fifty-nine, and seventy-eight. Since it is founded on the fusion of the conventional and novel, all of these looks include the borrowed element shown in their variants and originality.

The “Voss” collection’s use of floral patterns succeeds in presenting Japan as a country of pristine beauty and tranquility. The looks fifty-one, fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, and sixty are a few that include these motifs. The tenth showpiece featured in this collection, a stunning embroidery with a headpiece topped with a real, fleeting *Amaranthus* plant that relates to the frailty of life, is worth mentioning separately.

The layered textures of the collection convey the image of Japan with a long history that pays close attention to detail and frequently aspires to perfection. On the other hand, layered textures simply refer to the usage of different textiles to give depth and increase the design’s complexity. In the “Voss” collection, this was achieved through the use of textured fabrics, such as shells, and the layering of different materials, such as chiffon and silk. The look number sixty, which combined black feathers and chrysanthemums to create a dynamic and all-around intriguing design, is a fantastic illustration of this.

The flowing, draped silhouettes of the kimono is the element that appeared most frequently in the “Voss” collection, reflecting the Western idealization of the exotic East full of its mysteries (the second chapter of Said’s “Orientalism”). The kimono, arguably the most well-known representation of Japanese culture, with its flowing and relaxed silhouette that allows the space between the body and the garment (Japanese call it – *ma*) is a contrast to the more structured Western silhouette that often-featured garments that crush the boundaries between the physical body and clothes. In this collection, looks featured wide-sleeved jackets with a high waistline and draped skirts, that altogether alluded to the silhouette of traditional kimono. However, the look that stands out the most and that combines several of these previously mentioned elements is look number sixty-five.

From the birds and shells to the glass cuirass<sup>30</sup>, McQueen incorporated plenty of surprising moments in this collection. Another such moment originated in McQueen’s discovery of a 19th-century Japanese screen with embroidered panels at the Clignancourt flea market in Paris. With the dress he created from these panels, number sixty-five, McQueen showed how he perceived Japanese culture: the panels were very delicate, and breakable, and were richly embroidered with flowers, birds, and greenery (alluding to McQueen’s love of nature). “The screen was so fragile that when we touched it, it crumbled”, declared Sarah Burton.<sup>31</sup> The panels were “used flat over an underdress of polished oyster shells.”<sup>32</sup> In

<sup>30</sup> Glass is a symbol of fragility, something that is short-lived but still carries beauty within it. McQueen wanted “the floral design to be based on a Victorian-style pub mirror and illustrations in architect Owen Jones’s book *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), a source that inspired several of McQueen’s prints throughout his career.” V&A, The Museum of Savage Beauty (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/museumofsavagebeauty/mcq/cuirass-back-plate/>).

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Wilson. *Alexander McQueen: Blood Beneath the Skin*, p. 254.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Jackson and Clarie Wilcox. *Alexander McQueen*, p. 117.

this way, McQueen managed to preserve the original work, and at the same time, transform it into something modern and extraordinary. The outfit does, however, reveal some of the elements McQueen absorbed from his understanding of Japanese dress and how he transformed them into something uniquely his own through its rejection of natural body shape, flat expanses, elaborate sleeves, constricting wrap style, and overpowering headpiece.<sup>33</sup> Early in his career, McQueen had worked for Koji Tatsuno, protégé of Yohji Yamamoto, and was later a fan of Rei Kawakubo, so his perception of Japanese dress may show the influence of these two designers. This may account for why this particular dress does not follow the line of the body; instead, it wraps in a way that alters the whole silhouette, with the body free to move only thanks to the large gap between the garment and the body that becomes the triangular form.

In McQueen's collection, the fragile, embroidered panels and the use of oyster shells for the underdress serve as a representation of Japan and Japanese culture. Although McQueen tried to preserve the traditional elements of the culture he admired, by creating something innovative, he thus created his own signified, that of his own understanding and interpretation of Japanese culture. Additionally, McQueen's perception of Japan can thus be connected to Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*<sup>34</sup>. In Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, he talks about the Western interpretation of the East – something that is “other” than, “different” than “us” (West). The West's perception and definition of Japan as the “other” is a result of the signifiers such as kimono that flooded the Western markets, including architecture, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and other cultural symbols. Therefore, McQueen's creations for the “Voss” collection can be viewed as a reflection of Barthes' idea of the *Empire of Signs*, where the Western perception of the East is based upon the presented signifiers that are partially true but not the whole truth of the other culture. By using the signifiers, McQueen himself became a part of the West's interpretation of the East. However, the way he used the signifiers is what distinguishes him from being a part of the first group of designers: he took the elements of the Eastern countries and transformed them into something that was unique and his own, thus reflecting the idea that, although the West's perception of the East is constructed through symbols, it is also changing and constantly evolving. Would this approach and the purity of McQueen's intentions, therefore, be accepted or judged? Some would approve whereas some would find reasons to criticize. That just shows how much complexity the overall term of Orientalism contains.

## Conclusion

The “exotic” East has long been considered beautiful and alluring to the West. McQueen used just some of its elements, like the chrysanthemum, embroidery, and Japanese panels for the “Voss” collection. He took parts that are considered beautiful on their own and

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs*, 1970.

allowed them to play a completely different role by combining them, thereby challenging the concept of beauty, and reflecting the idea that, although the West's perception of the East is constructed through symbols, it is also changing and constantly evolving.

Numerous of McQueen's collections included components from Eastern cultures. His interest in these distant civilizations was not without controversy, though; some would contend that McQueen's frequent use of Eastern culture and absorption of it demonstrate disrespect for the cultural significance of the things he was utilizing. Nevertheless, McQueen's creativity and technical skill are overall celebrated and respected throughout the fashion industry including his incorporation of Orientalism into his design. Although certain designers, like Alexander McQueen, exhibit a deep admiration for Eastern cultures, their perspectives and understandings are constrained in some ways because they are based on the Western viewpoint, which is why there is a need for greater cultural sensitivity and understanding.

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