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REPRESENTATIONS AND INFLUENCES OF JAPANESE FASHION IN THE 20TH AND THE 21ST CENTURY SERBIAN FASHION¹

Abstract: The so-called ‘Japanese fashion revolution’ initiated by Japan’s culture of clothing and high fashion avant-garde designers like Kenzo Takada, Rei Kawakubo, Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto is a well-studied phenomenon in the history of Western fashion and has been the subject of many museum exhibitions respectively. However, no research thus far has been conducted on the influences of Japanese fashion on Serbian fashion, both in the last century as well as in the present moment. As such, this research aims to cast a light on how one of the most recognizable cultural products of Japanese national identity – fashion – operates in Serbia’s fashion systems of the 20th and the 21st century. By tracing different elements of Japonisme in Serbian 20th and 21st century fashion, whether present latently through French fashion or incorporated directly, the research tends to open a new chapter in both Japanese and Serbian fashion history. Such analysis will include representations of *Japanese modern girl / moda garu* phenomenon in Milena Pavlović Barilli’s works, writings on Kenzo by Anđelka Slijepčević, appropriations of kimono in Aleksandar Joksimović’s *Maria Tanase* collection, the influence of Miyake, Yamamoto and Kawakubo on Serbian fashion designers in the 21st century gathered around Belgrade Fashion Week Design Collective, and Neojaponisme in the most recent Serbian fashion production.

Keywords: Japonisme, fashion, kimono, exoticism, Japanese avant-garde, fashion design, Belgrade Fashion Week

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Introduction

When King Milan Obrenović immediately upon his coronation on March 6th 1882 wrote a letter to Japanese Emperor Meiji initiating bilateral relations between Serbia and Japan, the phenomenon of Japanomania and alongside it the term *Japonisme* were already present in European, predominantly Western European (French and English) visual and material cultural spheres. As art historian Gabriel Weisberg finds, the infatuation with Japan began in Europe and America after Japan agreed to establish trading relationships in the mid-1850s and lift the travel restrictions placed on its citizens. (Weisberg 2016: 14). Furthermore, a decade before King Milan would inform Emperor Meiji about Serbia's newly granted independence from the Ottoman Empire at The Congress of Berlin of 1878, French art critic Philippe Burty coined the term *Japonisme* in 1872 in a series of his literary essays. As Weisberg continues, Burty's enthusiasm must have done a great deal for the expansion of Japonisme, not only in France and England, but also across Europe. (*ibid.*: 24) While visual representations, consumed through *ukiyo-e* print albums and transformed into paintings remain dominant derivation of Japanese art and culture in the West, in terms of tangible, material culture objects, Japanese textiles and fashion had equally pivotal role in establishing and disseminating Japonisme both in Europe and the US.

Following the opening of the Port of Yokohama in 1859, silk became a major export, but it was more desirable to export silk products – including fashion items - which had greater added value. (Kramer and Savas 2020: 179) In *Japonism in Fashion*, accompanying the eponymous exhibition held at the Kyoto Costume Institute in 1996, chief curator Akiko Fukai notes that Japanese goods were initially offered for sale in the West in the first half of the 19th century, but it was the advent of international expositions in the mid-nineteenth century that gave rise to a broader recognition of Japan. These expositions lifted the veil of mystery from Japan as well as other countries, and for the first time Europeans came face to face with actualities, as opposed to their representations in words and pictures. (Fukai 1996: 2) Various Japanese textiles, fabrics, oil-paper umbrellas (*wagasa*), garments like kimono or even motifs or patterns represented in paintings have soon anchored themselves in Western European fashion systems. Although, as Fukai concludes, Japonisme appeared in fashion slightly later than in other Western arts, it possessed sufficient potency to become an element that brought about a basic transformation in

fashion. (*ibid.*: 1) Despite the fact that there was no active discourse on Japonisme in the late 19th and the early 20th century Serbia, the country was not exempt from it, primarily through close proximity to Vienna and intensified political as well as economic and cultural relations with France and major influences French fashions (in which Japonisme was already embedded) had on Serbian fashion. In an environment marked by a plurality of cultural models, fashion in the 19th-century Serbia developed through synergy and opposition, as well as through transition from the inherited Ottoman to the adopted European fashion system. (Maskareli 2019: 18)

Japonisme and Japanese *moda garu* in interwar Serbia

On the other side, direct contact between Serbia and Japan's culture of clothing, although not in terms of Japonisme as a fashion trend per se happened in 1915. On the initiative of Dušan Todorović, professor of Russian at the Institute for Foreign Languages of the Central Military Preparatory School in Tokyo, the Committee for aid provision to Serbia was founded, gathering wives of individuals from Japanese upper-social, political, diplomatic and military circles. (Žikić 2019) According to Todorović's article *Japanese Women for Serbia*, written for the daily newspaper *Politika* on September 8th, 1915, and his letter attached to the aid shipment dispatched on December 24th of the same year, the shipment, among sanitary materials, bedding and groceries, included 1894 linen shirts, 175 flannel shirts, 850 pairs of underwear, 512 flannel schlafrock and 50 quilted Japanese schlafrock.²

Interestingly, despite using German words, Todorović differentiates between just a 'schlafrock'³ (nightgown, house mantle, dressing gown) and a 'quilted Japanese schlafrock' (Japanese dressing gown)⁴ whose identifiers - national provenance, technique and quantity much smaller compared to other shipped clothes – most certainly signify of some form of kimono, or less likely *jinbei*, a two-piece cotton or hemp men's nightwear. As the Meiji era (1868–1912) is recognized as the beginning of Japanese modernity and increased Westernization, Japanese silk merchant Shiino Shobei was ordered by the Meiji government to attend the international exposition in Vienna in 1873 to survey the market for exports of high profit silk products to the

² <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/414323/Srbija/Zavoji-iz-Japana-za-ranjenu-otadzbinu#!> [accessed on 26. 11. 2021]

³ The term originates from German words 'schlaf' (sleep) and 'der Rock' (robe).

⁴ Similar term 'Japonse rock' is mentioned in Dutch trade records with Japan from the beginning of the 18th century.

West. One of the items he conceived was a silk dressing gown that followed European fashion in cut, which he called a 'Japanese gown', typically made of padded and quilted closely woven silk and decorated with embroidery of Japanese motifs and widely promoted in the early 1900s *Liberty and Company* and *Babani*⁵, achieving notable popularity. (Fukai 1996). Given that the aid was sent to Serbia only three years upon the beginning of the Taisho era (1912-26), what Todorović describes as 'quilted Japanese schlafrock' could have been a modification of Shobei's Japanese gown popularized during the Meiji.

Dresses and capes made of kimono material or even from pieces of kimono were already popular in England and France in the second half of the 19th century, and by the end of the century kimono was worn as a fashionable dress at home rather than just being seen as a static exotic object. In such dynamics, as Fukai states, kimono gave impetus to a transition in twentieth-century dress that went far beyond exoticism as a source of inspiration. (ibid.: 7) Starting with Charles Frederick Worth in the 19th century and then fashion designers like Paul Poiret, Jeanne Paquin and Madeleine Vionnet in the first three decades of the 20th century, the kimono silhouette and with it its coloration, structure, hems, sleeves and overlapping closures irreversibly transformed Western fashion. The reason for 'à la japonaise' style not being conceptualized in the 1920s Serbian fashion as an independent trend was not only the lack of trade agreements, but the fact that both Serbia and Japan were, in a colonial and imperialist Western eye, perceived as different ends of (Oriental) exotic other. However, as art historian Simona Čupić observes, the fact that Serbia was completely deprived of European colonial experience does not indicate that it had a lack of interest for it, especially in those forms of colonialism exploited by the interwar popular culture, including fashion. (Čupić 2011: 36) To paraphrase Čupić, the perception of entertainment and commodities based on Francophilia meant indirectly accepting the way in which France / the West observed African, Asian, or other non-western cultures. (ibid.) In that sense, Japonisme arrived in Serbia as a finished product, distilled through the Western gaze.

Initially, Japonisme (at least to the extent of representations of Japanese and Japanese-inspired fashions) in Serbia's fashion system could be observed with Milena Pavlović Barilli's

⁵ Babani, founded in Paris in 1894 by Vitaldi Babani, was a fashion house based on the Boulevard Haussmann specializing in imported exotic goods, including artworks and handicrafts, and from the 1910s onwards, original garments inspired by their imported merchandise. (Fukai 2002: 719)

fashion illustrations. When Barilli exhibited her works in Belgrade in 1928, a notable Dadaist artist Dragan Aleksić wrote the following in his critique of the show:

„Josephine Baker, Arabians, Mexicans, Spaniards, Persians, Chinese, *Japanese*, grotesque figures from One Thousand and One Nights, Rococo, Parisian gigolos, professors, femmes fatales, dancers, Argentine barmen, low lifers from everywhere, señoritas, Indians... And a whole world of movement, concentration, elation, eyes, looks, touches, smiles. The world to which we are brought particularly closer through magazines, romantic stories, movies, and modern fairy tales.” - Dragan Aleksić, *Vreme*, December 17th, 1928. (Žarić 2018: 17)

Aleksić's review attests to Čupić's claims: Japonisme in Serbia, was alongside with many other forms of exoticism, filtered through Western fashion magazines, literature and movies. Barilli's fashion illustrations demonstrating traits of Japonisme were the result of such appropriation. On her fashion illustrations created in the 1920s, the eyes of women are represented with two thin lines filled with whiteness; by dissolving tempera in water, she achieved the authenticity of vamp and geisha make-up – smoky eye shade, white face powder and soft cheek blush – while by using tempera to the fullest, the artist achieved the intensity and the gloss of the lipstick. (*ibid.*: 39) Whereas the primary source of inspiration for such treatment of a fashionable female figure and her make-up obviously has its roots in Japanese prints, Barilli accustomed them from fashion magazines like *Vogue* and glamorous Hollywood stars like Pola Negri, Lillian Gish, Baby Peggy, Gloria Swanson and Theda Bara.⁶ In addition to pioneering representations of Josephine Baker and Rudolph Valentino as the sheikh, Barilli is the only figure in the corpus of both Serbian art and fashion systems to deliver the representation of Japanese modern girl culture, in Japan known as *modan garu* or simply, *moga*, through her 1929 painting *Japanese modern girl*. (**fig. 1**)

Such representation does not come as a surprise given that Japanese modern girls were a response to American *flappers* and French *garçonnes*, fashionable figures already present in Barilli's oeuvre, and more importantly, her personal style. Unlike the Victorian dress styles encountered during the Meiji period, Western fashions of the 1920s seemed more appropriate to Japanese changes in lifestyle and made more aesthetic sense given that, in the early 20th century, Asian dress had greatly influenced European and American fashion designers. (Jackson 2020:

⁶ During her stay and schooling in Belgrade, Barilli lived at the Royal palace with the Karađorđević dynasty she was related to. Besides the private cinema that was available at the court, Queen Maria and Princess Olga were subscribed to many Western fashion magazines and have used services of many renowned French and British high fashion houses.

161) Moga appeared in the time of the so called ‘Taisho Democracy’, during the emergence of liberalism and socialist movements in Japan, and the country’s growing rivalry with the West. In her essay *Moga: the audacity of being a modern girl*, Mariko Nagai (2020) states that:

“Modern girls cut their long black hair, symbolic of a traditional Japanese woman’s beauty. They removed their conservative kimonos, the very clothes that defined the upper class, and put on vibrant kimono designs and Western dresses that gave lightness to their steps. These girls took it all in and made it all their own: bobbed hair, knee-length dresses, stockings, painted eyebrows and dark rouge. They flirted with boys and men and sometimes other girls, they ignored hisses from the old, they danced and danced until their feet hurt in their pumps, but they could have danced even more if they hadn’t had to go to work the next day. They drank. They smoked.”⁷

Barilli’s *Japanese modern girl* aligns with such description. The modern girl depicted on the Serbian artist’s canvas has her eyebrows and lips intensively styled with make-up, her complexion is darker and her hair shorter and seemingly colored in brown, departing from the traditional ideal of Japanese beauty. More importantly, her vibrant yellow kimono with a shimmer typical for silk or satin seems more relaxed as it is not traditionally closed. With a hand adorned in jewelry, she is pulling her kimono in order to expose herself while her gaze is breaching the norm being directly fixed at us, adding a sexual element to the atmosphere of the artwork. In the 1920s, the cut of the kimono remained the same, but the designs bore and unmistakable modern flavor aimed at creating a dynamic visual statement for the chic city dweller. (Jackson 2020: 163) Additionally, she is, same as Nagai noted, smoking a cigarette, one of the most emblematic cultural artifacts of the modernist gender roles transgression and West/the Other dynamics. What is, however, interesting about Barilli’s Japonisme is that she had, on her fashion illustrations and *Japanese modern girl*, conveyed its dynamics both ways: Japanese aesthetics that influenced fashions in the West and the Westernization of Japanese fashion expression, creating a hybrid social – and fashion – construction. Nonetheless, representations of elements of Japanese fashion in Barilli’s oeuvre are seminal in tracing Japonisme in Serbian fashion system, restored in the second half of the 20th century.

Kenzo Takada and kimono in postwar Serbia

⁷ <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/moga-the-audacity-of-being-a-modern-girl/> [accessed on 27. 11. 2021]

While the colonial and imperialist discourse of exoticism under which both Serbia and Japan were perceived in the establishment of modern fashion in the West justifies the lack of Japonisme in Serbia the first half of the 20th century, reasons for its absence in domestic fashion until the 1970s were primarily political and economic. As during the Second World War Japan as a part of the Axis supported Germany, relationships between Serbia and Japan were at its lowest until Japan's surrender in 1945. When it comes to Japanese fashion, following the tumultuous years of the Pacific War (1941-45), the wearing of kimono drastically declined, going from daily wear to a form of ceremonial costume. (Rout 2020a: 17) At the same time, the postwar Japan saw the flourishing of the so-called 'Western dressmaking culture' when kimonos were, alongside other fabrics reconfigured into new outfits and women massively enrolled into dressmaking schools, completing the adoption of Western-style clothing in Japan. (Inoue 2021) Gradually, Western dressmaking culture, upgraded with different local traditions and countercultural formations (both Western and Japanese) influenced the inception of authentic Japanese fashion expression in the second half of the 20th century.

Japan and Serbia, back then Yugoslavia reestablished their diplomatic relations in 1952 soon after Japan had regained its sovereignty, and despite finding themselves with different political and economic systems and opposing ideologies, Japan and Yugoslavia have worked on the development of their bilateral relations throughout the Cold War period. (Glišić 2016) According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia, the Agreement on cultural cooperation between Yugoslavia and Japan was signed on March 3rd, 1968.⁸ In the same year, on April 8th, president Josip Broz Tito went on his first state visit to Japan, becoming the first president of a communist country to visit the post-war Japan. In such environment, although for a short period of time yet impactful enough, Japanese fashion was not unknown in Serbia.

Notable fashion designer Anđelka Slijepčević, who in the 1960s after returning from Paris (where she worked for *Lanvin*) organized first runways and founded the first contemporary fashion design department in Serbia, was very much aware of the prominence Kenzo Takada was gaining in Paris and globally in the 1970s. In her many columns and interviews, Slijepčević often mentioned Kenzo, stating that "the biggest transformations in clothing nowadays are brought by Kenzo and the Easterners, from Russians to Chinese and Japanese. Asian sense for opulence and color alongside French refined taste birthed what distinguishes French and Parisians as

⁸ <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/japan> [accessed on 28. 11. 2021]

exceptional.” (Slijepčević-Ljesov 2013: 39) Similarly with the acceptance of some elements of Japonisme in Serbian fashion system of the first half of the 20th century, awareness of Japanese fashion in the second half of the 20th century as well came via France. However, as seen from Slijepčević’s writings in national (fashion) press, there is acknowledgment of Japanese fashion design as something inherently Japanese and moreover, there is understanding of its impact on French / Western fashion. In the article for *Politika* daily from October 7th, 1977 titled *Kenzo continues the battle for the future*, the Serbian designer writes that “the Japanese designer turned European, becoming the number one designer when it comes to the youth.” (*ibid.*, 320) More importantly, in the same article Slijepčević emphasizes a significant feature of Japanese avant-garde design that will consequently impact Serbian designers in the 21st century: the ‘bulky silhouette transformed into a layered and voluminous bundle of materials’ present on her sketches too. As such, Slijepčević did not miss what, according to Claire Wilcox, fashion curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Kenzo achieved. Kenzo offered an alternative to the restrictive mores of Parisian haute couture with ready-to-wear, youthful chic and introduction of volume, layering, and mixing of color and patterns that was global in feel rather than specifically ‘oriental’. (Wilcox 2020: 279)

While Anđelka Slijepčević provided the first critical and theoretical thought on Japanese fashion in Serbia, Aleksandar Joksimović applied it in practice, although minorly compared to other subjects he thematized in his designs. Contrarily to Slijepčević’s fascination with Kenzo as a contemporary Japanese designer, Joksimović did resort to kimono as a global ‘oriental’ artifact. Having somewhat mythical status as a fashion designer favored by the regime and dressing the first lady Jovanka Broz, the so-called ‘Yugoslav Dior’ was not in the position to rethink Japanese design, but to act as a creative extension of Yugoslav politics. As the leading non-aligned force, Yugoslavia was balancing between the (political) East and the West, thus showcasing its designs around the world or during official state or diplomatic visits was yet another occasion to demonstrate its power. By the time notions of Japonisme – kimonos - appeared in Joksimović’s 1976 collection *Maria Tanase*, designers like Christian Dior and his successor Yves Saint Laurent had their shows organized and boutiques opened in Japan, incorporated Japonisme in their designs, and have been dressing notable clientele including the members of the Imperial family. Nevertheless, despite Joksimović’s oeuvre being possibly the most researched within the

frameworks of Serbian fashion history, elements of Japonisme in his works are hitherto unknown.

This could possibly be to the fact that he incorporated such elements both as the response to and the result of Western trends, and that he submitted them to the ‘national exoticism / Balkanism’, especially as *Maria Tanase* collection was based on Romanian folk costumes.⁹ Fashion anthropologist Danijela Velimirović observed this, finding that Joksimović’s acceptance of both local and global in the fashion matrix combined with his unutterable refinement became his trademarks. (Velimirović 2008: 53) She defines this process as ‘self-orientalization’, stating that Joksimović utilized it as a form of resistance against the Western fashion hegemony in order to establish new visual preferences and stylistic codes in Yugoslav fashion. (*ibid.*: 53) Prior to realizing *Maria Tanase*, the designer was not a stranger in drawing inspiration from heritage of Yugoslav nations or ethnic minorities (Serbian medieval history, stained glass from Catholic churches) and combining them with Pierre Cardin’s futurism. Resorting to Romanian folk costume was, as Velimirović elaborates, the reproduction of Orientalism as a pattern establishing the East/West dichotomy in which Romania was more ‘East’ compared to more inventive and progressive Yugoslav fashion, and which was not, by all means, neither culturally nor politically neutral. (*ibid.*: 114) Essentially, Joksimović took the Romanian blouse as the base, cut open its sleeves from below creating butterfly sleeves and maximized its length down to the ground. As these garments were actually made of leather, he transformed traditional Romanian embroidery into geometric and minimalist embossments creating a design that was, both in form and pattern, reminiscent of kimono, while the shine of the leather could easily, at least on the photograph, be confused with silk. (**fig. 2**) Another fact that speaks in the favor of Joksimović’s awareness of Japonisme is that he personally possessed and worn a kimono - black silk kimono with a golden dragon on its back, dated to 1977 – which he had given to the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade in 2012.¹⁰ In the 1970s, wearing kimono was not an uncommon practice by men from different creative milieus, from music to fashion, as they have been worn by David Bowie and Freddie Mercury respectively.

⁹ Yves Saint Laurent based his 1981 FW collection entirely on the Romanian blouse and Henri Matisse’s painting of the same name. As *Maria Tanase* was presented at Salon de Cuir in Paris in September 1976, it is possible that Saint Laurent could have been to an extent inspired by Joksimović as well.

¹⁰ The kimono is available for online viewing on Europeana platform:
https://classic.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2048214/europeana_fashion_23819.html?utm_source=new-website&utm_medium=button [accessed on 29. 11. 2021]

Miyake, Yamamoto and Kawakubo: The Japanese avant-garde in the 21st century Serbian fashion

At the same time when Joksimović was remodulating kimono, Kenzo and Issey Miyake paved the way for the second wave of Japanese fashion epitomized in Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, initiating the so-called ‘Japanese revolution’ in Paris. It was also the first time that a non-western city – Tokyo - was designated as a Global Fashion Capital and included in the gilded group dominated by Paris, Milan, London and New York. (Rout 2020b: 307) While their influence has been widespread, their revolutionary trends stimulated a pronounced response from the younger Belgian designers who graduated from the Antwerp Academy in the 1980s.¹¹ (English 2018: 7) This response was, although somewhat later given sociopolitical circumstances, stimulated in Belgrade as well, especially after Belgrade Fashion Week (BFW) was established in 1996 as the first fashion week in Eastern Europe and millennial shift saw further democratization of Serbian society and mobility of local designers. The avant-garde Japanese designers inspired radical thinking, and their philosophy about designing persuaded their followers to challenge traditions, to rethink old ideas and to re-configure old forms (*loc. cit.*), gaining momentum among designers from Belgrade Fashion Week Design Collective and Belgrade Design District. Post-Yugoslav environment of the 21st century Serbia, marked by the fall of Slobodan Milošević and denouncement of the 1990s Gastarbeiter and Diesel clothing culture symbolic of the regime as a ‘national costume’ was a fertile ground for the application of certain aspects of the Japanese avant-garde. Same as Kawakubo and Yamamoto could be viewed as a clear rejection of the elements closely associated with kimono with their aesthetics of plain dark deconstruction which was intentionally international (Rout 2020b: 307), Serbian designers influenced by them sought a new fashion expression that was more international rather than solely national or folklorized. This, however, does not mean that Serbian designers did not create a distinctive visual language which enabled the visibility of Belgrade as (inter)national fashion

¹¹ The group, famously known as Antwerp Six, included Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten, Dirk Bikkembergs, Marina Yee, Walter Van Beirendonck, and Dirk Van Saene. Other designers notably influenced by Yamamoto and Kawakubo include Martin Margiela, Helmut Lang, Hussein Chalayan, Viktor & Rolf, and later John Galliano and Alexander McQueen.

center. On the contrary, tenets of Japanese design had a significant role in that process and the formation of many designers gathered around BFW.

Upon graduating from the Fashion Department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, an institution where Japanese avant-garde has already been accepted and recontextualized, Dejana Momčilović incorporated certain premises of Miyake and Yamamoto's poetics in her works realized in Serbia. Furthermore, while in Antwerp, she worked for Dries Van Noten who was, as a part of Antwerp Six, undoubtedly influenced by the Japanese. Through collections presented at BFW in 2008 and 2009, Momčilović significantly leaned on "Miyake's inventive use of fabric and successive layering creating anti-structural, organic clothing which takes on a sculptural quality" (English 2018:4) and Yamamoto's aesthetics of imperfection. **(fig. 3)** The 2008 designs, even though masterfully cut, appeared like flows of white, red, gray and black cloth (colors omnipresent in Yamamoto's design) tied around the body, referring to Yamamoto's SS 1992 collection. Yamamoto and Kawakubo's deconstruction of tailoring, with stitching revealed and seams sometimes incomplete, unhemmed edges, tears, tips, hanging threads and frayed sections, often tied in knots left to decompose, became the prototype for cutting-edge design practice. (*ibid.*: 7) Ripped stockings from the 2008 collection Momčilović further deconstructed in 2009, where models appeared on the runway with fabric attached to on the back of their feet, adding a punk element to the collection which will become her signature expression. Up to the present day, Momčilović remains the most prominent representative of the punk aesthetics in contemporary Serbian fashion, common for Kawakubo as well.

Deconstructive practice of Japanese design to alter the silhouette is present throughout entire career of Budislava Keković. Each of her collections represents the destabilization of the silhouette presented in the previous one, as it can be seen on the example of SS 2018 collection *Distance* and pre-fall 2018 collection *Overlapping*. In *Distance*, Keković followed "Kawakubo's puzzle-like construction, as if separate kimono elements have been pieced together at random, subverting and destabilizing assumptions about the conventions of form". (Wilcox 2020: 281) As such, Keković based her collection on Samurai armor, tying plates of leather with laces into knots. **(fig. 4)** In *Overlapping*, the Serbian designer paid homage to Miyake's *Pleats Please* collection, creating pleated flowing forms of tulle. Layers of white, grey and black tulle have completely, at least visually, erased the body by equating the fabric and the garment with the movement and its flow. **(fig. 5)** In that regard, both Keković and Miyake "build their garments

and conceptualize their ideas regarding space, balance and the relationship of the shape of the garment to the underlying body”. (English 2018: 4) In Keković’s words: “Overlapping materials of different shades brings new impressions, pleating changes the texture of the surface, filling and tattering of the garments adds dimension. Together it overlaps and interlaces and adds new quality, sensual and visual, previously unknown.”¹² Finally, in her pre-fall 2019 collection titled *Duality of Gentle Superstrong*, Keković referenced one of Yamamoto’s most iconic pieces, the black coat with a tulle bustle from his FW 1986/7 collection. (**fig. 6, fig. 7**)

Quoting Kawakubo as seminal in their formative years and beginnings of their careers, Vesna Kracanović and Aleksandra Lalić incorporated dominants of Kawakubo’s designs into unique fashion expressions. Both designers accustomed voluminous balloon skirts present in Kracanović’s 2013 *Reborn* and SS 2014 collections (**fig. 8**), historical reconfigurations of gender, unorthodox cuts and puffed sleeves from Kawakubo. While Kracanović has parted with Kawakubo’s poetics since then and turning to formalism, she reintroduced it in her FW 2021 collection, *Oz*. Padded colorful thermal wadding jackets with gigot sleeves and ruffled collars brought back Kawakubo’s layering, volume and asymmetry into Kracanović’s designs. (**fig. 9**) On the other side, Lalić’s fashion expression is imbued with Kawakubo’s oversized bowties, uneven hemlines, collars, rugged edges, ruffles, various patterns like Baroque florals or plaid, and her intellectualism and conceptualism. With Kawakubo’s educational background in fine arts and aesthetics and Lalić’s in art history and theory, their work, “characterized as embodying notions of anti-fashion, often asymmetrical in appearance, using folds and pleats, exposed stitching and contrasting textures and fabrics rely on challenging artistic conventions, including the notion of perfection or the ideal, sustainability, or planned progression”. (*ibid.*: 74)

This is already apparent in Lalić’s first collection *Hair Dress* in which she followed Kawakubo’s theorem ‘the body becomes dress becomes body’. Realized in 2011, *Hair Dress* collection comprised of dresses made of felted human hair, with accentuated seams and distorted silhouettes. (**fig. 10**) Regarding the collection, the designer stated that “the intention was to bring out the clear forms that are based on the shapes of the female body, yet those shapes do not follow the body but discreetly transform it. The result is a differently shaped

¹² <https://bigsee.eu/budislava-kekovic-budislava/> [accessed on 29. 11. 2021]

body than the desired one, the one which is presented in public space as the only accepted form of the body.”¹³ Kawakubo mastered such practice in collection *Bump* for spring 1992, also known as *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*. (**fig. 11**) In the collection, padded sections are added to the clothes to distort the contours of the body including the shoulders, allowing the actual clothing to critique the notion of the perfect female shape. (ibid.: 72) In that sense, Lars Svendsen’s thesis on Kawakubo presented in his book *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2004) that she ‘rewrites the body’ (Svendsen: 2006: 89) could be applied to Lalić too. Another notable feature of Kawakubo’s practice present in Lalić’s work is her contrasting of textures and fabrics, upon which the Serbian designer based her entire FW 2018 collection, *Bruno's De triplici minimo*.¹⁴ The collection comprised of voluminous overcoat forms with accentuated shoulders and bulky silhouettes, made of gabardine and other tough woolen fabrics. (**fig. 12**) Underneath them were barely visible blouses, jumpsuits and dresses made of soft silk. Kawakubo accustomed such treatment of fabrics from practices of wearing kimono, which would be made of cotton and then lined with silk where certain luxuries were not abandoned but simply hidden to all except of the wearer, ultimately encouraging restraint and refinement. (ibid.: 2) Lalić based her overcoats on the form of tracksuits typical for the 1990s Diesel culture in Serbia, hiding rather than exposing the luxury. In her words, “it is important to observe the collection within the local social stream as only then it raises the question of the lack of taste, and not only in aesthetics, but ethics as well.”¹⁵ For the Japanese, elegance and refinement do not concur with glamour, or with status or class (*loc. cit.*) which is the notion Lalić actively incorporates in her designs, even after somewhat moving from Kawakubo and turning to historicism.

Conclusion: (Neo)Japonisme and beyond

As the research has demonstrated, different notions of Japonisme have been revived and reinterpreted in the 20th and the 21st century Serbian fashion, both in accordance with and despite the local sociopolitical dimension. While Serbian fashion system did not show fascination with Japanese fashion as deep as Western fashion systems had, certain aspects of both Japanese

¹³ <https://www.notjustalabel.com/aleksandra-lalic> [accessed on 30. 11. 2021]

¹⁴ The collection was inspired by Ksenija Atanasijević’s PhD about Giordano Bruno’s 1591 work, *On the Threefold Minimum and Measure*, defended at the University of Belgrade in January 20th, 1920. After her thesis was successfully defended, she became the first woman to hold a PhD in Philosophy in Serbia.

¹⁵ <https://lavie.rs/moda/aleksandra-lalic-vise-od-revije/> [accessed on 30. 11. 2021]

culture of clothing and high fashion are nonetheless present in it. With exoticism of Japonisme and the Japanese avant-garde being integrated in the 20th and the early 21st century Serbian fashion, Ivana Pilja and Nevena Ivanović are leading the new wave of Japonisme, what could be seen as 'Neojaponisme' in Serbian fashion of the last few years. Merging sci-fi, neo-noir, cyberpunk with contemporary not only Japanese, but Asian subcultural trends overall, Pilja went further in deconstructing Kawakubo's silhouette by creating designs with angular edges and geometric patterns and overexaggerating certain body parts, similarly to Gareth Pugh in England. Models resembling Kawakubo's layered bundles of materials, Geisha hairstyles, often amplified into sculptural forms, as well as Geisha make-up became trademarks of Pilja's presentation, with the designer even naming her models *Cyber Geishas*. **(fig. 13, fig. 14)** As the most prominent representative of millennial generation in Serbian fashion, Nevena Ivanović is actively inspired with Japan and is the only Serbian designer to holistically base her entire poetics on Japan: reconfigured Samurai and Geisha clothing, hairstyles, collection names and narratives based on Japanese mythology, Japanese street-style and the utilization of contemporary technologies. **(fig. 15)** In that regard, Ivanović approaches the sensibility of her Japanese contemporaries like Mame Kurogouchi, Jun Takahashi, and Yuima Nakazato. Whereas Neojaponisme in Pilja and Ivanović's works could be a research subject on its own, insight into their production allows us to construct the full image of the Japonisme discourse in Serbian fashion, spanning from the early 20th century to the present day. In such discourse, not only that a new chapter of Serbia and Japan's cultural contacts is revealed, but as well as new possibilities for initiating further cooperation between the two countries. Same as Kawakubo's dresses that transformed into bodies and bodies into dresses, so does fashion transform into history, and history into fashion. Infused with meaning, both fashion and history, as shown in this research, allow us to uncover new cultural meanings, deserving further study.

Summary

Alongside other types of fascination with the Orient, Japonisme was present in the works of Serbia's fashion figures from the beginning of the 20th century, with Milena Pavlović Barilli's painting *Japanese modern girl* becoming a pioneering representation of kimono and the Japanese modern girl / *moda garu* phenomenon in Serbian visual culture. However, Japonisme in Serbian fashion of the first half of the 20th century was filtered through Western notions of exoticism, submitted to dominant, primarily French, fashion trends. With the restoration of bilateral relations after the WW2 between Serbia and Japan, the local fashion system saw further dissemination of Japonisme, in which awareness of the global impact of Japanese fashion designers in the 1970s like Kenzo Takada is revealed in writings by Anđelka Slijepčević. On the other side, the leading Yugoslav / Serbian fashion designer, Aleksandar Joksimović resorted to 'self-orientalization' by turning Romanian folk costume in kimonos as a (political) response to Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent's successful appropriations of Japanese culture. Consequently, by identifying the influence Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo had on Serbian fashion designers in the 21st century gathered around Belgrade Fashion Week Design Collective (Aleksandra Lalić, Budislava Keković, Dejana Momčilović, Vesna Kracanović) it becomes transparent in which ways Japanese avant-garde fashion was integral in the formation of contemporary Serbian fashion expression as a denouncement of the 1990s politically demarcated culture of clothing. Lastly, the most recent practices in Serbian fashion design initiated by Ivana Pilja and Nevena Ivanović are completing the discourse of Japonisme presence in Serbian fashion with subcultural, technologic and street-style elements of contemporary Japan. While not a dominant aesthetic and stylistic tendency in Serbian fashion, Japonisme marked it to an extent that allows its contextualization within the system of Serbian fashion history, welcoming further studies on the subject.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Milena Pavlović Barilli, *Japanese modern girl*, oil on canvas, 1929 © The Gallery of Milena Pavlović Barilli, Požarevac, Serbia



Figure 2: Models wearing leather 'kimonos' from Alekandar Joskimović's 1976 collection *Maria Tanase*, photographed by Velisav tomočić for the November 25th, 1976 issue of *Bazar* fashion magazine © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, Serbia



Figure 3: Dejana Momčilović FW 2008 © Belgrade Fashion Week



Figure 4: Budislava Keković, *Distance* SS 2018 © Belgrade Fashion Week, Budislava



Figure 5: Budislava Keković, *Overlapping* pre-fall 2018 © Belgrade Fashion Week, Budislava



Figure 6: Budislava Keković, *Duality of Gentle Superstrong* pre-fall 2019 © Belgrade Fashion Week, Budislava



Figure 7: Yohji Yamamoto, coat, FW 1986-87 © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 8: Vesna Kracanović, *Reborn*, 2013 © Vesna Kracanović



Figure 9: Vesna Kracanović, *Oz*, 2021 © Belgrade Fashion Week



Figure 10: Aleksandra Lalić, *Hair Dress*, 2011 © NOT JUST A LABEL



Figure 11: Rei Kawakubo / Comme des Garçons, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body* spring 1997 © Kerry Taylor Auctions



Figure 12: Aleksandra Lalić, *Bruno's De triplici minimo* FW 2018 © LaVie



Figure 13: Rei Kawakubo / Comme des Garçons, spring 2015 ready-to-wear © Vogue



Figure 14: Ivana Pilja, *Cyber Geisha*, 2017, Belgrade Fashion Week © NOT JUST A LABEL



Figure 15: Nevena Ivanović, *Ensoneo*, 2016 © Alek Živković

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