

From Rags to Riches: Transformation of Values in a Japanese Fashion Context

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing research on slow fashion, sustainability and luxury studies in a case-study highlighting the biography of clothes in a certain context, i. e. that of a new menswear fashion company from Japan, KUON, established in 2015. KUON is a company that reuses 50-150 years old Japanese cotton textiles (such as kimono). Using a craftsmanship-based design strategy, KUON upcycles these historic textile as new menswear. The methodology I use is interviewing the founder of KUON, Arata Fujiwara, as well as examining the objects (objects-based).

The original context of the vintage and antique textiles and garments used by KUON was from humble economic circumstances in northern Japan during the feudal era (Edo period, 1615-1868) and well into the modern era in an environment that, because of the cold climate, could not grow cotton. Cotton fabrics had to be bought by the inhabitants from the richer parts of the country. During the long use of these valuable garments and home textiles, treasured for their rarity and comfort in a hard economic context, they fell apart and had to be mended by the peasant women with stitches (called sashiko) to reinforce, beautify and prolong the life of the fabric. These mended and patched textiles are called boro (“rags” or “something brittle that falls to pieces”). The concept in itself reflects Japanese aesthetic theory found in, among others, the tea ceremony (the concept of wabi-sabi) as well as ethics, as seen in the concept mottainai (“don’t waste”).

The upcycling process today at KUON actively turns these textiles into unique, modern menswear by employing seamstresses from an area that has a long history of boro an area stricken by the Fukushima disaster of 2011. Thereby, an approach to socially conscious fashion is taken. The outcome is contemporary as Western tailoring and pattern-making is used together with hand-stitching and machine-sewing. I argue that KUON is an example of a company exploring key facets of sustainability based on a local craft cultural heritage within a price range that can clearly be labelled as luxury. To conclude, a shift of values has taken place, going from a connection with poverty and hardship to exclusivity, radiating an aura of immaterial values and mythic qualities of luxury, preciousness and uniqueness.

Thereby, the study aims to contribute to research about luxury from the point-of-view of sustainability.

Keywords

Luxury, fashion design, clothing, slow fashion, sustainability