

Fascination with Japanese fashion culture in Poland during the crisis of the late 1970s and 1980s

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Abstract

The revolutionary approach to fashion of Japanese designers aroused keen interest in communist Poland. Even if an access to news from outside the Iron Curtain was significantly impeded, Barbara Hoff, the influential fashion critic and designer was writing with admiration about them. She was trying to introduce the spirit of Japanese designing into her own projects realised for 'Hoffland'. Jerzy Antkowiak, the famous designer from the State Enterprise 'Moda Polska', was fascinated with traditional Japanese costume. In a crisis-stricken country the meeting with the fashion culture of Japan became an intellectual adventure for Polish designers and critics.

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Introduction

The 1970s and 1980s were the time when Japanese designers began to play an increasingly important role on the international fashion scene. Their fresh attitude to fashion remained in opposition to manifestations of luxury and wealth present in the western world, especially "the power look". Around 1980 the capitalist countries were entering a period of prosperity. Meanwhile, the process of slow decay of the inefficient system of the communist economy continued behind the Iron Curtain. In Poland it was also the time of an acute political crisis. The wave of strikes and protests was spreading all around the country aimed at communist authorities. The Polish United Workers' Party was afraid of losing its ruling position, so the political crisis culminated in the imposition of martial law in 1981. The society was significantly impoverished and suffered oppression of the communist state, but among intellectuals there was a strong interest in avant-garde art and literature, so very alien to communist ideology. Although access to information from outside the Iron Curtain was significantly impeded, the phenomenon of modern fashion created in Japan was recognized very early, especially by Barbara Hoff, the Polish journalist and designer. She had started to write about it already in the early 70s. The touch of Japanese avant-garde inspiration was visible also in costumes designed by her for the state department store "Domy Towarowe Centrum" in Warsaw. Another important person in the Polish world of fashion who was bewitched by Japanese culture was Jerzy Antkowiak, the prominent designer from the state-owned fashion house "Moda Polska." Meeting with the culture of distant Japan became an intellectual adventure for Polish fashion designers and critics in a crisis-stricken country. The reception of Japanese influences in fashion was astonishingly widespread in communist Poland.

Phenomenon of Japanese designers in the eyes of Barbara Hoff

Japanese designers attracted the attention of Barbara Hoff, the brilliant journalist of "Przekrój". "Przekrój" was one of the most culture-forming weeklies in Poland, which has been published since 1945. The first pages of every issue had to be a tribute to communist authorities, but the majority of its content was devoted to matters of culture. Some paragraphs had an advisory character concerning everyday life. The fashion column existed in "Przekrój" from its beginnings. Barbara Hoff joined the weekly team in 1954 as a young graduate of art history, coming from an intelligentsia family. Aversion to the communist regime prompted her to look for an area where she could counteract attempts to transform the inhabitants of Poland into "homini sovietici" - people blindly devoted to communist ideology. She decided to work in the world of fashion. In the Polish People's Republic all originality and independence, including the desire for being fashionable, was perceived as a threat to the totalitarian communist state. Barbara Hoff's fashion column directed the longing of Poles towards up-to-date world fashion and thus made a breakthrough in their psyche, not allowing its full submission to the communists „уровниловка” which means an unjustifiable “equation down”. Her practical advice for self-making and self-composing fashionable clothing was much prized in the country of permanent shortages. An extremely important part of the Barbara Hoff fashion column were comments on the most important fashion trends. For many Polish citizens they became the window to the western, capitalist world and we have to remember that the “Przekrój” circulation was really large (about 700.000 copies in the 1970s).

In communist Poland a serious problem for people interested in fashion was lack of information. Shops offered only clothes of indigenous production, mostly low quality; boutiques of well-known designers were only a dream, western fashion journals were unavailable for common people, and even if one could find reprints of fashion photography in Polish magazines, they were the most often published in black and white. Texts about fashion focused primarily on the sphere of good advice on how to sew something fashionable from the few materials available. Fashion criticism almost did not exist, although attempts were made to inform about basic trends. Names of Western designers appeared only sporadically in the Polish press. Barbara Hoff was trying to fill this gap by her columns, but she also had problems with access to information about world fashion, for example, only from time to time was she able to get the single issue of *Elle* or *Vogue*, sometimes borrowed only for few hours. In such a case Barbara Hoff was using her skills as an art historian – she analysed photos deeply trying to recognise the most important trends and to decide which of them were supposed to last and which were only fashion's whim. She noticed very quickly the potential of Japanese designers. She described Kenzo Takada as "one of the most interesting fashion designers" already in 1972 ('Przekrój' 1972, no 1411). She emphasized the importance of his style of loose, spacious outfits, worn in layers. The invention of his wide trousers in 1975 she even called "an artistic event" ('Przekrój' 1975, no 1583). According to Barbara Hoff all of the most fashionable outfits of 1976 were either invented by Kenzo, "the most creative designer," or were done in his spirit. She called him "a genius" even if his projects were "shoddy and too expensive" ('Przekrój' 1976, no 1614). She recorded the inevitable invasion of Japanese concepts of fashion into the world of western designers. At the end of 1977 Barbara Hoff wrote: „The great spirit of Kenzo hovers over many things of 1978. His fashion line, once bizarre, magnificent and astonishing, slowly, slowly mastered the minds of designers.” (1977, no1706 – 1707) Several months later she stated that in the contemporary fashion world the most important phenomena were Kenzo and punk, but at the same time she pointed out that Kenzo's newest concepts were not so innovative as before. (1978, no 1717). In 1983, Hoff stated: "Kenzo, who once turned the world of fashion upside down, does not matter so much now" ((1983, no 1960). It is worth noting that what attracted Barbara Hoff to Kenzo's

fashions was not its "ethnic" colourfulness, but the form: the amplexness, multi-layeredness, astonishing wrapping, everything which made the body lost in clothes.

Barbara Hoff wrote also about the second of the first-generation of Japanese designers, Issey Miyake, but she did not pay as much attention to him as to Kenzo Takada. She described his 1977 collection as "interesting" but "less shocking than his previous incredible wide, long robes" ('Przekrój' 1977, no 1665). She also reprinted photos of clothes designed by him several times ('Przekrój' 1975, no 1587; 1976, no 1612; 1978, no 1720). In the 1980s Barbara Hoff manifested an enthusiastic admiration for new generation of Japanese designers, Matsushiro Matsuda, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo and their innovative "Japanese concept" in fashion. In 1983 she wrote about them: "they show strange but simple fashions . . . at the Japanese shows there are not only interesting patterns, not only beautiful gray and dun colors or fabrics susceptible to crumpling, woven in Japan, completely unknown in Poland. But there are also things that are strangely crumpled, with cut and burned holes, and there are things worn on the left side, for example jackets without lining (you can see the whole "cuisine" of sewing - seams, pillows, tapes, etc.) . . . Something is going on in fashion in Japan, there are enthusiasts, and their concept is certainly not commercial" (Przekrój' 1983, no 1960)



Figure. 1. Barbara Hoff, New Fashion '83, 'Przekrój' 1983, no. 1960. Courtesy of the Przekrój Archive.

A few months later, she emphasized the revolutionary influence of Japanese designers, who "changed the whole aesthetics and the concept of sex in fashion." She stressed the uncompromising nature of the new wave of designers from Tokyo, their "ease, freedom and courage in thinking about clothing." She also stressed that Kenzo Takada, Kansai Yamamoto and Issey Miyake were indispensable to prepare Europeans for the revolution of their younger colleagues ('Przekrój' 1983, no 1992). The following year, the columnist underlined that although the Japanese still were creating genius things - they had stopped shocking: the audience became accustomed to their extravagance ('Przekrój' 1984, no 2025). From this point on, Rei Kawakubo or Yohji Yamamoto were still present in Hoff columns, but not on such a large scale.

Japanese influences in 'Hoffland'

Barbara Hoff was not only a journalist, but above all a great fashion designer. In the communist state, however, it was not right to create your own brand or to promote your own name. Barbara Hoff managed to achieve both - unfortunately without the financial benefits that would belong to her in the capitalist world. She made a living mostly by writing columns until the early 1980s, not by working as a designer, even if she was creating ready to wear collections for the State Department Stores "Domy Towarowe Centrum" every year. In 1974 the label HOFFLAND was invented but it remained the state property. To make a collection Barbara Hoff had to spend hours and hours on production matters. Unfortunately designing wasn't the most time-consuming part of it. She also had to organize the whole production, beginning with searching

for suitable fabrics in Polish production plants. Sometimes it resulted with commissioning very successful fabric designs but, just as often happened in the planned economy system, sometimes she had to accept materials that nobody needed. However, clothes designed by Barbara Hoff, even if made of inferior quality fabrics, were always immersed in the mainstream of world fashion.

It is possible to trace strong Japanese influence in her designs. Short working jackets called "kufajki", created in 1976, she herself derived from Kenzo creations ('Przekrój' 1976, no 1618). Small bags, invented the same year, were even simply named "little Kenzos" ('Przekrój' 1976, 1621). Also "grandfather's shirts" and narrow dresses with a high slit, from the same collection, had their counterparts among Kenzo Takada's propositions. There are many outfits in Japanese style from the late 70s collections: mostly multilayered, ample compositions, tied with different types of strings and sashes, with quite visible references to obi sashes – a very important element of inspiration also for "Japanese" ('Przekrój' 1977, no 1673; 1978, no 1726, 1727, 1730, 1732).



Left: Figure. 2. Barbara Hoff, Świętokrzyska Collection. The House Collection of 'Przekrój,' 'Przekrój' 1976, no. 1618. Courtesy of the Przekrój Archive.



Right: Figure. 3. Barbara Hoff, Layers. The House Collection of 'Przekrój,' 'Przekrój' 1978, no. 1726. Courtesy of the Przekrój Archive.

The second wave Japanese designers' inspiration in Barbara Hoff's creations falls after 1982 - when the "ragged" collections of Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo had appeared (shown by Barbara Hoff in "Przekrój" 1983, no 1660). In 1983's Barbara Hoff collections there were silhouettes formed by narrow strings irregularly tied around the hips and waist ('Przekrój' 1983, no 1975, 1976), also mini dresses with an ample top appeared once again ('Przekrój' 1983, no

1984) and very wide shorts ('Przekrój' 1983, no 1978). She was conscious of how fashionable they were and was inviting her readers in such a way: "Why go to Paris, why go to Tokyo, come to Warsaw, to Hoffland, and buy yourself cheap hits of world fashion!" ('Przekrój' 1983, no 1978). With the year 1984 the era of asymmetry and contrasts in Barbara Hoff designs began, with a lovely collection of ingenious asymmetrical dresses ('Przekrój' 1984, no 2036 – 2037). According to the designer, her 1986 collection was made in the "Japanese spirit" ('Przekrój' 1986, no 2137, 2143). There were asymmetrical, crazy shirts and large blouses combined with narrow trousers. A nice series of outfits was made of flannel with a "Japanese" printed pattern. It was supposed to be composed of real Japanese characters, but . . . something went wrong, and finally we dipped a stick in paint . . . and we just made the pattern" ('Przekrój' 1986, no 2128). The time of explicit Barbara Hoff fascination with "the Japanese" ends after 1986. It is worth noting that Barbara Hoff was the most outstanding Polish designer due also to the consistent implementation of the mission to make Poles fashionable, despite the difficult economic and political situation in the country.



Left: Figure. 4. Barbara Hoff, Bindings. The House Collection of 'Przekrój,' 'Przekrój' 1983, no. 1976. Courtesy of the Przekrój Archive.

Center: Figure. 5. Barbara Hoff, Alternative shirts. The House Collection of 'Przekrój,' 'Przekrój' 1986, no. 2143. Courtesy of the Przekrój Archive.

Right: Figure. 6. Barbara Hoff, Flannel Series. The House Collection of 'Przekrój,' 'Przekrój' 1986, no. 2143. Courtesy of the Przekrój Archive.

Fascination with Japanese tradition in "Moda Polska"

Not only Japanese fashion designers inspired fashion in Poland. The country of blooming cherry has fascinated generations of Poles at least from the end of the 19th century: mostly by its art and poetry. In Poland this fascination was welcomed by communist authorities because it was a

great pretext to remind people about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and to conduct propaganda against the USA. After 1945 Japanese cinema was also much appreciated. Polish intelligentsia was delighted with films of Akira Kurosawa – a must see for every educated person. In the 70s, Japan's presence in popular culture increased due to the growing popularity of Japanese martial arts - judo and karate. In 1976, Barbara Hoff created a collection of bathrobes modeled on Japanese kimonos. The peak of popularity of Japanese culture fell in the second half of the 1980s and was associated with the broadcast series "Shogun" with Richard Chamberlain and Toshirō Mifune. It was the only feature film available on Polish television on Sunday evenings, so it gathered whole families in front of TV sets and its influence was inestimable.

Jerzy Antkowiak, designer and artistic director of the state-owned fashion house "Moda Polska", created a collection inspired by traditional Japanese costume in 1985. There is one man's outfit preserved from this collection, named „Shogun” (The National Museum in Warsaw, Inw. No. Wzr. t. 2432/a-c). It features a voluminous quilted vest, wide trousers and a sash. The vest has extended shoulders, so very fashionable in the 80's, but also characteristic for samurais costume. The "Shogun" outfit impresses with its excellent color composition. The crimson trousers contrast with the intense purple and navy-blue vest. The sash was composed of several smaller pieces of striped cotton fabrics, with subdued colors, which contrasted with fragments of the intensely pink synthetic fabric and gold lamé. Such a garment could only come into being during the official show of "Moda Polska", but it could become an inspiration for Polish women who often had to sew clothes for themselves. Jerzy Antkowiak himself admitted to the fascination with Japanese cinema, and in the collections of "Moda Polska" from the 1980s, we could often see multilayeredness and asymmetry coming from Japanese fashion.

Unexpectedly, in the country inside the Iron Curtain, in the era of a gigantic economic and political crisis, Polish fashion designers greedily processed inspirations from Tokyo, trying to follow the avant-garde of global trends. We can say that the fashion world of the 1970s and 1980s was under the influence of Japanese designers in general, but Barbara Hoff and Jerzy Antkowiak were very conscious of their fascinations' source. Especially Barbara Hoff, who was trying to extract the primary Japanese inspirations from the fashion world, and to follow them.

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