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Japan: Well-suited for bespoke menswear

Fashion

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Is Japan the new international center for bespoke suits, shirts and shoes?

This was the arresting proposition put forward on May 22 at the "Japanese Bespoke Menswear: Thomas Mason and Permanent Style" symposium held at the Quartz Gallery in Shibuya, Tokyo, where some of Japan's most celebrated menswear ambassadors gathered to outline their views and tell their individual stories.

The event, part of an international series sponsored by the textile manufacturers Albini Group, drew around 200 industry heavyweights, style journalists, and an assortment of Tokyo's most style-conscious men for a panel discussion, chaired by influential London-based author and journalist Simon Crompton of Permanent Style, a world leading menswear blog.

The idea of Japanese centrality in the world of bespoke may come as a surprise to traditionalists, who are more used to the sartorial grand tour of London, Naples, Milan, Florence and Paris. But its possibility says much about the advances made in recent years in high-end menswear in Japan. Crompton, one of the world's most knowledgeable and well-traveled style journalists, opened proceedings by declaring Japan to be "the most exciting place in the world for bespoke menswear."

How did this come about? Panelists shirt-maker Masanori Yamagami of Strasburgo and master shoemaker Yohei Fukuda, both stressed the importance of Japanese artisans learning their craft at the point of origin, the now long-established practice of aspiring craftspeople making pilgrimages to the style capitals of Europe to study under the masters.

A reputation for hard work and dedication to craft has seen many young Japanese hopefuls taken on as apprentices at legendary ateliers despite language difficulties. Of the panelists, Fukuda trained in Nottingham and worked at John Lobb in the U.K.; and tailor Noriyuki Ueki (Ciccio) learned his skills at Dalcuore in Naples, Italy. Once proficient, the apprentices returned home ready to open their own businesses. It appears that in Japan such artisans have had no difficulty maintaining the standards of their former



Left to right: "Japanese Bespoke Menswear: Thomas Mason and Permanent Style" symposium panelists Kanae Hirasawa, Yohei Fukuda, Yoshimi Hasegawa, Yasuto Kamoshita, Simon Crompton, Yosuke Kagami, Noriyuki Ueki and Masanori Yamagami
KO TSUCHIYA

mentors and even, in many cases, exceeding them.

The participants, which included journalists Kanae Hirasawa and Yoshimi Hasegawa, mentioned the positive influence of the traditional Japanese artisanal ethos — the scrupulous attention to detail that as a deeply ingrained principle is applied equally across disciplines. Crompton noted that unlike the Europeans, who tend to specialize in one area and one kind of product, Japanese craftspeople benefited from having a broad range of interests and crossover skills — at one point Yosuke Kagami, head of bespoke at Isetan, even likened Ueki's meticulous trouser making to the skills of a sushi chef. The philosophy of wabi sabi (nothing is perfect) was also mentioned as a guard against complacency.

Another advantage, at least in terms of quality, is scale. It was noted that many of Japan's bespoke artisans work alone, or with no more than one apprentice. This allows for far greater quality control and a more personal service than large European houses. Add to this Japan's impeccable service ethic and a traditional squeamishness about raising prices ("un-Japanese," commented Fukuda), and a clearer picture begins to emerge as to why Japanese bespoke is becoming increasingly attractive to a discerning and globalized customer base.

The internet has helped, too; placing Japan firmly on the list of must-visit destinations for globe-trotting sartorialists. Crompton, himself, has done much to boost the profile of Japanese craftspeople with a series of posts and personal endorsements. Tokyo was also recently listed as one of the world's best destinations for bespoke menswear in the Financial Times How to Spend It magazine, while Fukuda's almost too beautiful to wear shoes have been wowing footwear fans on Instagram.



It's in the details: Symposium attendees examine bespoke shirt samples brought to "Japanese Bespoke Menswear: Thomas Mason and Permanent Style." KO TSUCHIYA



Smart speaker: Simon Crompton of Permanent Style talks about the strengths of Japan's bespoke menswear industry.
KO TSUCHIYA

Simon Crompton, one of the world's most knowledgeable style journalists, declared Japan to be 'the most exciting place in the world for bespoke menswear.'

But before we get carried away, a mild note of caution was sounded by Mark Cho of the Armoury menswear store in Hong Kong, an attendee to the event. He sagely observed that people tend to view anything produced in a distant land with a sense of wonder and are, perhaps, predisposed to feel impressed by Japanese-made goods, especially since Japan is also exceptionally good at managing the image it projects to the outside world. His comments were met with nods and murmurs of assent from the panel.

Concerns were raised too about the way forward. On the panel, Yasuto Kamoshita, cofounder of United Arrows and creative director of Camoshita, and Kagami were generally optimistic, though it was noted that there may be limits to what can be achieved in the domestic market. As for global expansion, the Japanese bespoke industry's current one-man-band business model would likely require outside help for it to fully realize its potential. Small is certainly beautiful, was the message, but it has practical limitations. Kagami cited the unavoidably long wait times required by sole traders, while sheer geography, in terms of arranging fittings, is also a problem.

Still, as the sun began to set and the discussion wound down, Japan establishing itself as an international center of bespoke menswear appeared a realistic goal.

At the after party on the venue's terrace, the panelists relaxed with wine and canapes and gazed across the unobstructed neon-lit Tokyo skyline at a view that, like the future of the Japanese bespoke menswear industry, appeared bright and full of possibilities.



Fashion game-changer: Singer-turned-designer Rihanna, the first black woman in history to head up a major Parisian luxury house, waves during a promotional event of her brand, Fenty, on May 22. AFP-JJII

Rihanna makes historic launch of Fenty in Paris

THOMAS ADAMSON
PARIS
AP

Rihanna, the first black woman in history to head up a major Parisian luxury house, is unveiling her first designs for her fashion brand Fenty at a pop-up store in Paris.

The collection, named after the singer-



New in town: Designs from Rihanna's first collection for Fenty are unveiled at a pop-up store in Paris on May 22. AP

turned-designer's last name, comprises ready-to-wear clothing, footwear, accessories and eyewear, and was made available in Paris' Le Marais area on May 24, debuting online May 29.

"This is a moment in history," said Rihanna, 31, who was wearing a white tuxedo dress for a preview of the store. "It's a big deal for me and my entire generation."

News of the singer's groundbreaking new deal with LVMH, the world's largest luxury group, shook up the fashion industry earlier this month. The Barbados-born star's lines are the second time LVMH has created an original brand.

But the move also acknowledges that the fashion industry now considers the ideas of a major pop star to be as valid as those by established and trained designers, for example Nicolas Ghesquiere of Louis Vuitton, or even the lauded Alber Elbaz, formerly of Lanvin, who is currently out of work.

Fenty has been heralded by some critics as the first major house of the Instagram age.

The brand says it will be based in Paris, like its parent company, conglomerate LVMH, but will operate from a digital flagship on a "See-Now-Wear-Now" model,

forgoing the usual luxury fashion seasonal previewed designs.

"They were flexible enough to allow me to have a different perspective on the way I wanted to release things," Rihanna said. "Coming from such a traditional background in fashion (as LVMH), you don't think there's another way that will work and they allowed me to do that."

Fenty is expected to capitalize on the acclaim received by Rihanna's most popular

luxury venture, the Fenty Beauty line, which launched in 2017 and has been said to help revolutionize the makeup industry by celebrating diversity in its foundation collection of 40 shades.

Though the star appeared calm, "it's a facade," Rihanna said when faced with the expectations before the historic launch.

"There's pressure every single second," she continued. "It's not like crumbling pressure, but it's like 'you better get it good girl.'"



On: Design
Mio Yamada

New brands to delight design fans

Important 'news'

Wooden furniture maker Karimoku, renowned for its Karimoku New Standard brand that matches international designers with Japanese craftspeople, has a new, very important clientele:



cats. Borrowing a slogan from its collaborator Rinn — the cat goods brand behind the stunning, albeit pricey, Neko Modern Cat Tree — Karimoku Cat's concept is "Cat First." In design, though, it's also very mindful of cat owners' aesthetic preferences.

The Karimoku Cat Tree (¥42,984), a compact 124-centimeter-tall climbing frame, could easily be mistaken for a stylish bookshelf. Its triangular base and oval steps are non-slip textured by *uzukuri*, a traditional technique of scrubbing wood surfaces to expose the grain, while the scratching post, something that is usually covered in sisal twine, is disguised by the use of white or natural cotton rope. The Karimoku Cat Bed (¥32,184), meanwhile, applies Karimoku carpentry know-how to perfecting cat comfort. A smoothly carved shallow bowl, the bed has a fitted cushion of breathable cotton foam covered in supersoft micro fur. Its oval shape was chosen to ensure the cat has enough room to wiggle around, while still feeling the security of a small space.

Both items feature soft, rounded edges and a minimalist aesthetic that wouldn't look out of place in any modern home, but don't be tempted to use them yourself. Remember, "Cat First."

<https://karimoku-cat.jp>

Little DJs, cooks and zoo keepers

Kondo Inc.'s new kids' toy brand Dou?, which launched for pre-order this month, is a delightful lineup of wooden edutainment toys, created under the guidance of a group of mothers who make up the core members of the Dou? team. Though the moms' main concerns were about safety — all the toys comply with CE toy safety directives — the items are also creatively designed to include unusual details.



Every piece in the collection — which includes *hiragana* alphabet cards shaped like biscuits and a traveler-themed set of building blocks housed in a suitcase-shaped trolley — is worth mentioning. But there are three On Design favorites. First is the Little DJ wooden set of decks (pictured), which has two turntables that emit sounds when spun. The sounds change depending on the speed the discs are rotated, so kids can mix beats with their left and right hands. There are also three sliders and a tiny abacus for the little ones learning to count.

For budding cooks, Little Chef offers the tools and ingredients to make a ham salad sandwich, including a choppable tomato and a jigsaw lettuce leaf. Best of all, the set's cooker not only doubles as the items' box, but it also has different shaped slots in the lid to encourage kids to tidy up with a game of matching items to holes.

Last, but not least, is the My Zoo pull toy that allows toddlers to turn their wooden companion into a giraffe, rabbit or elephant. The animal heads are tucked inside of the body and can be swiveled out, with the elephant cleverly using the silhouette of the front wheel to create the shape of a trunk.

All the items are individually handcrafted with prices ranging from ¥3,996 for Little Zoo to ¥15,500 for the Carry Me building block set.

www.dou-toy.com

Modern Works, modern shopping

Last month, furniture and interior store Francfranc launched Modern Works, an exclusive lineup of coordinating designer pieces, now available to buy online and at a new store in Yokohama and a limited outlet in Aoyama, Tokyo.



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Describing the range as "normal standard," Modern Works aims to fill the gap of what it calls a "middle" market: consumers who can't afford high-end designer furniture, but are discerning and willing enough to spend a little extra for quality.

The vast collection — which includes everything from dining chairs to couches, tables to cabinets, and poufs to beds — is also a deliberate departure from Francfranc's predominantly plush and bright or pastel-colored fare. New clean, streamlined shapes are introduced, with designs alluding to a classic mid-century modern aesthetic. Colors, too, are different — primarily dark or dusky blues, grays, oranges and black, with natural wood-hued or black accents and details.

There are far too many pieces to describe, but until February next year, the entire range can be viewed in at Modern Works Aoyama, an unusual cashless store that uses QR codes to guide visitors to online product information and allows them to either purchase items straight away or order via the webstore.

bit.ly/modernworks