From Cowboys to Rock: The Transcultural Evolution of Denim and American Style in Japanese Fashion and Music

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Abstract

This paper explores the transcultural journey of cowboy iconography—particularly denim—and its adaptation into Japanese fashion and music culture. It begins by examining how jeans, rooted in American workwear and cowboy imagery, were introduced to Japan through postwar contact with the United States—via American military presence, black markets, and Hollywood Westerns. This transmission laid the foundation for denim's widespread adoption and evolving meanings in Japan. Tracing a symbolic lineage from the American frontier to Japanese street style, the paper examines how cowboy imagery was hybridized through rockabilly and rock subcultures in both fashion and sound. Grounded in cultural theory, it argues that denim functions as a mobile symbol of rebellion, masculinity, and authenticity, continually reinterpreted across contexts.

Biography

Yayoi Motohashi is associate professor of the Faculty of Architecture and Design at Kyoto Institute of Technology in Kyoto, Japan. She is an art historian, fashion and design historian, curator, associate professor. Previously, from 2003 to 2022, Professor Motohashi was a curator at the National Art Center in Tokyo (NACT), which opened in 2007 as the national government's fifth and newest National Museum of Art in Japan. She organized many exhibitions including "Fashion in Japan 1945-2020" in 2021 and "Cartier, Crystallization of Time" in 2019. She helped launch "Roppongi Art Triangle" in 2007 in collaboration of NACT, Mori Art Museum and Suntory Museum of Art. "Miyake Issey Exhibition: The work of Miyake Issey," was on view in 2016. It was the first solo exhibition exclusively dedicated to a world-famous-designer at NACT. She was professor at Kyoto University of the Arts from 2022 to 2024. Professor Motohashi studied French literature at Waseda University. She also studied at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and Helsinki University. Professor Motohashi received an MA in Art History and Aesthetics at Waseda University and a Ph.D at the Institute for the Study of Global Issues from Hitotsubashi University.