

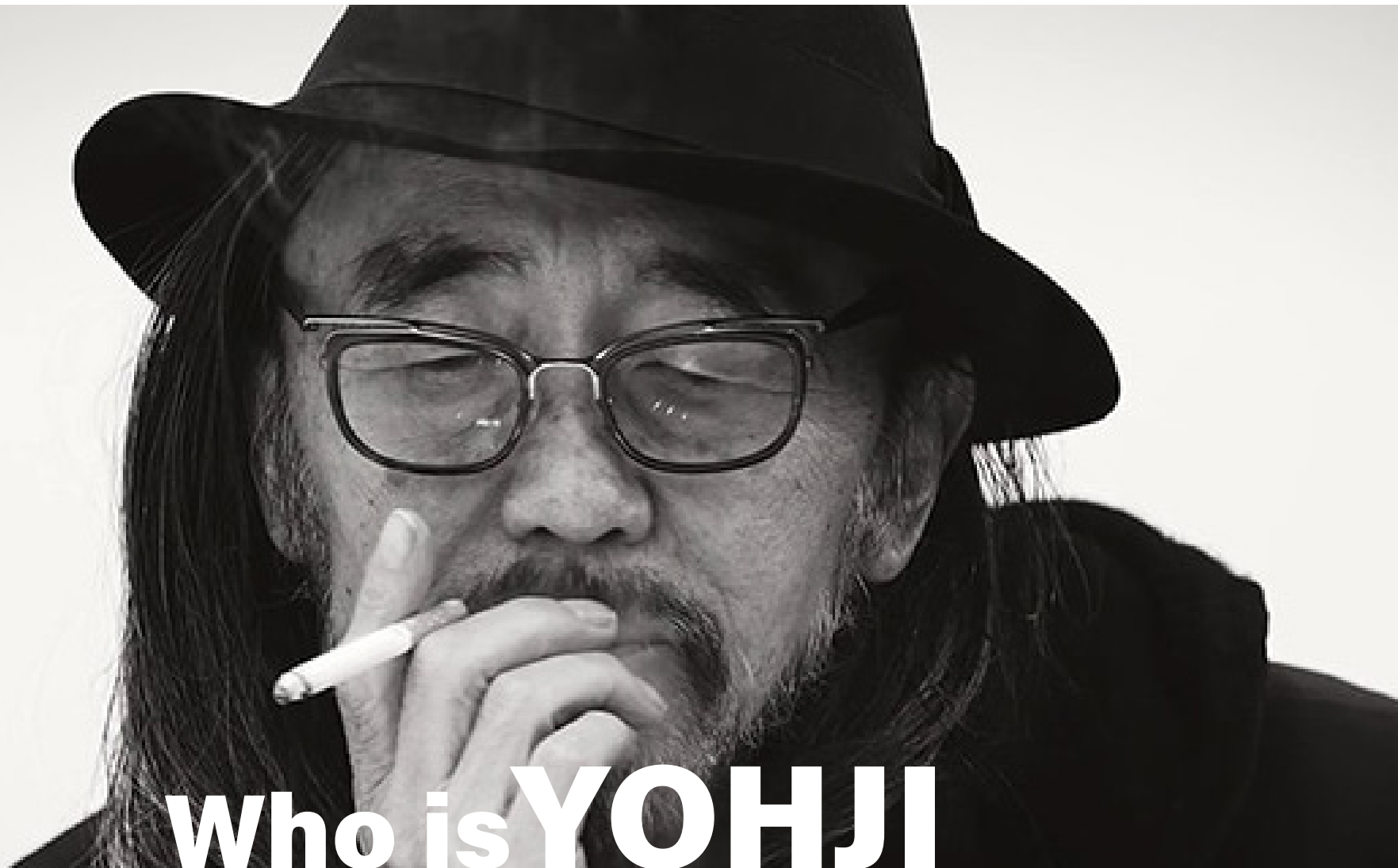
Yamamoto

A Lifetime of Rebellion:

The life & legacy of anti-fashion's
greatest living designer

by Keven Goh

DESIGNER through the JESCA



Who is **YOHJI YAMAMOTO?**

▲ Portrait of Yohji Yamamoto. © Vein Magazine, 2017.

Within the world of contemporary fashion design, few names carry legacies as enduring or as influential as Yohji Yamamoto's. Spanning a career of over 50 years, the Japanese designer's oeuvre is characterized by his affinity for asymmetrical silhouettes, deconstructed tailoring, and, perhaps most of all, his distinctively stark color palette-- consisting primarily of black and other subdued tones.

Since their public debut, Yamamoto's designs have reshaped modern understandings of tailoring, gender fluidity, and the evolving relationship between garment and personal identity in fashion. Today, he is regarded not only as one of the pioneers of avant-garde fashion, but as one of the last living "anti-fashion" designers. Yamamoto's journey towards becoming

one of the world's most renowned fashion designers is inseparable from the world in which he was raised. Evident in Yamamoto's writing is a clear sense of disillusionment with the pressures of conformity and capitalistic success, as well as the way women were viewed in postwar Japanese society. Raised by a widowed mother, Yamamoto's early life was molded by grief and resilience.



▲ Portrait of Yohji Yamamoto, photographed by Maciek Wolejko-Wolejszo, 2017.

With the death of his father during the Second World War and the nation's turbulent reconstruction period, Yamamoto entered adulthood in pursuit of stability by studying law at Tokyo's Keio University until, in his words,

"... [after] about my third year there, it lost all meaning for me and I found myself despondent" (Yamamoto, 2010, pg. 29).

Y'S (1977): the dawn of "ANTI-FASHION"



▲ Bunka Publishing Bureau. (1977). HF Material Collections, Autumn/Winter 1977 [Excerpt]. Used Internet Shop.

Driven by his ideals, Yamamoto completed a degree in fashion design at Bunka Fashion College and debuted his first collection, named *Y's*, in Tokyo in 1977. The collection marked a startling departure from the trends in womenswear that had come to dominate high fashion: “While the Western world was fixated on glam, form-fitting clothes that showcased every curve, Yamamoto was crafting oversized, draped garments that veiled rather than revealed” (Yokogao Magazine, n.d).

While European critics and other designers of his time largely favored brightly colored and highly eroticized garments, Yamamoto concealed his models' bodies in flowing, dark fabrics that deconstructed and repurposed traditional menswear motifs such as overcoats, buttoned shirts, and tailored trousers. Almost none of the traditionally Eurocentric markers of femininity, including high heels, skirts, or corsets are present in *Y's*. Yamamoto would later reflect on this era, stating that “my starting point was wanting to protect a human's body” (Yamamoto, 2011). He characterizes himself more as a blacksmith producing a suit of armor than a gendered fashion designer, a mentality that openly challenged the fashion industry's overwhelmingly binary framework of beauty and set the precedent for his future work.

Y's distinctly black color palette would also

become a long-standing motif in Yamamoto's designs. While the decision was in part a rejection of the time period's trends, Yamamoto also believed in challenging the very notion that fashion itself needed to be glamorous, status-driven, or even flattering for the wearer. In a 2020 interview, Yamamoto remarks that “Black, to me, represents frustration and despair from thinking that I am nobody. And it represents a strong will to break down such feelings and a freedom that coexists with the will” (Tashjian, 2020). Thus, Yamamoto's preference for black can be understood as a symbolic rejection of the loss of identity that comes with chasing trends.

Despite his disdain for colorful, sexualized clothing, however, Yamamoto's designs are anything but conservative. His signature absence of color forces attention toward the way garments drape across the body as subjects move, revealing a different kind of sensuality— one rooted in dynamic movement and quiet confidence, rather than sensationalized exposure.

Thus, Yamamoto transformed black from a symbol of austerity into a medium of expressive freedom, displaying to the fashion world a previously unseen mode of rebellion. In spite of its controversial beginnings, *Y's* would go on to evolve into its own sublabel under the Yohji Yamamoto brand, innovating on its source formula into the present day.



▲ Yamamoto, Y. (2020). Spring/Summer 2020, Look 11 [Photograph].



POUR HOMME (1981): THE GLOBAL STAGE

▲ Tokyo Metropolitan Government. (2022). Yohji Yamamoto's 1981 fashion show at the Denen Coliseum, Tokyo [Photograph]

In 1981, the groundbreaking ideas that established themselves in 1977's *Y's* were introduced formally to international audiences. However, *Pour Homme* is not merely a redux of *Y's* ideas, placed on male models.

Rather, Yamamoto's sophomore collection seeks to dismantle the Western suit itself. In stark contrast to the sharp silhouettes of 1980s power dressing, Yamamoto's menswear slouches, drifting across the body as though liquid. Jackets are finished with unpadded shoulders, oversize trousers collapse into themselves. Perhaps most distinctively, raw edges and unfin-

ished hems expose the construction processes usually hidden by the runway (Ahmed, 2022).

Therefore, if *Y's* seeks to shield women against the exploitation of their femininity, *Pour Homme* reframes masculinity as vulnerable, imperfect, and even melancholic. The unfinished, asymmetrical aesthetic of *Pour Homme* feels distinctly reminiscent of Japanese wabi-sabi; which celebrates "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete beauty" (Ahmed, 2022); translating them into silhouettes that seem to imply a reserved pensiveness rather than hypermasculine swagger. Rather than shielding them in suits of armor, Ya-

mamoto asks men to inhabit fashion as a reflection of the vulnerable self—creased, sloping, and often full of unresolved questions. Thus, *Pour Homme* redefines presence not through dominance but through absence, marking a departure from Eurocentric ideals of masculine power.

Pour Homme failed to resonate with many Western critics, who denounced the collection's raw presentation as dystopian and pessimistic—with some even bestowing it the nickname "Hiroshima Chic" (Frankel, 2018). However, Yamamoto reflects on his Paris debut with a sense of mischievous playfulness, writing: "I had no

intention of opposing the status quo ... I was turning my back to stick my tongue out at the world" (Yamamoto, 2010, pg. 71). He would later clarify his thought process, contextualizing his design as a celebration of imperfection: "I think perfection is ugly ... somewhere in the things humans make, I want to see the scars, failure, disorder, distortion" (Frankel, 2018). While *Y's* is a declaration of resilience and protection, the complementary *Pour Homme* is a gentle meditation on vulnerability and openness. Like *Y's*, it went on to become a staple in Yamamoto's repertoire, seeing numerous reinterpretations throughout the ongoing years.

▲ Yamamoto, Y. (1981). Fall Ready-to-Wear 1981 [Photograph]



▲ Yamamoto, Y. (2021). LOOK 16, Autumn/Winter 2021–22 [Photograph].



▲ Yamamoto, Y. (2023). LOOK 43, Spring/Summer 2023 [Photograph].

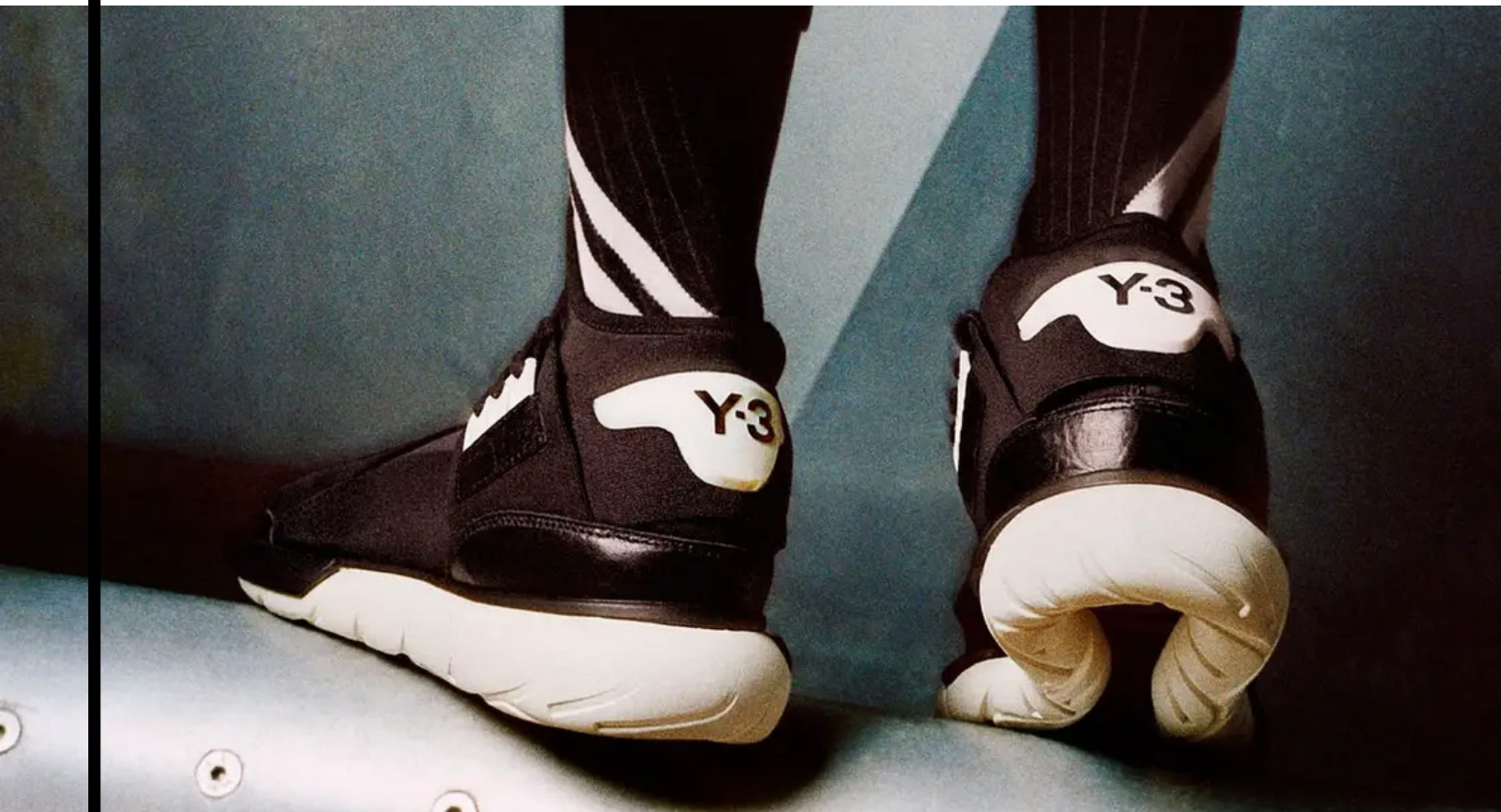


▲ Yamamoto, Y. (2024). LOOK 19, Autumn/Winter 2024–25 [Photograph].

POUR HOMME

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Y-3 ■ the language of the street



▲ Yamamoto, Y. & adidas. (2022). Y-3 Qasa High (Black/White) [Photograph].

(2003)

Nearing the turn of the century, Yamamoto again began to feel a frustration— not with the world around him, but with fashion itself, and his role in it. He explains: “Fashion had become so boring. I felt I had come too far from the street. I couldn’t find people wearing my clothes anymore, and I felt so lonely” (Spagnolo, 2018).

To alleviate this alienation, Yamamoto took the unprecedented step of collaborating directly with the established sportswear retailer Adidas, leading to the creation of Y-3. Before Y-3, both high fashion designers and main-

stream manufacturers largely turned their noses up at the notion of collaborating with one another. In fact, before partnering with Adidas, Yamamoto approached Nike, who immediately rejected the proposal without explanation (Leitch, 2015). The end result, however, was a symbiotic fusion of Yamamoto’s distinctive avant-garde tailoring and the advanced synthetic fabrics and technologies utilized in Adidas’ athletic equipment.

Y-3’s 2003 runway debut immediately established the collaboration as neither conventional sportswear nor as haute couture,

but something entirely new altogether. Yohji reworked Adidas’ iconic Three Stripes motif into flowing jackets, oversized track pants, and other common sportswear articles distorted by his signature tailoring (Ozzard, 2002). The incorporation of advanced performance fabrics, such as lightweight polyesters and waterproof laminates, however, gives the collection a sleek, technical sheen that was new for Yamamoto’s repertoire. The subsequent introduction of 2013’s Qasa sneakers further sparked widespread adoption by streetwear enthusiasts that cemented the design as one of the most popular products of the Y-3 collaboration, if not one of the most influential silhouettes in sneaker design (Hypebeast, 2022).

Today, Y-3 is heralded as one of the most foundational blueprints in contemporary streetwear. Yamamoto and Adidas not only anticipated the designer–sportswear partnerships that now dominate the industry, but also legitimized the role of highly technical, function-first design in the world of runway fashion. Errolson Hugh, lead designer of the eponymous luxury techwear label Acronym, credits Yamamoto with “directly [influencing] the way we understand volume, tailoring, the color black, time, [and] movement” (Johnson, 2023). For Yamamoto, the project marked a return of his design language into everyday life— proof that, despite his immense success, he had not lost his integrity. For the world of fashion at large, it was a paradigm shift: a declaration that movement, adaptability, and utility could be reimagined as the very definitions of luxury.



▲ Yamamoto, Y. & adidas Y-3. (2024). Fall/Winter 2024 Men’s Collection – Look #1 [Photograph]. Vogue.

IGNITES through the DECADES



▲ Yamamoto, Y. & adidas Y-3. (2011). Fall/Winter 2011 Menswear – Look #20 [Photograph].



▲ Yamamoto, Y. & adidas Y-3. (2016). Fall/Winter 2016 Menswear – Look # [Photograph].



▲ Yamamoto, Y. & adidas Y-3. (2025). Fall/Winter 2025 Menswear – Look 4 [Photograph].

DESIGN through the DECADES

Y -3 (2011-2025)



An Enduring INFLUENCE:

Across decades of tireless work, Yohji Yamamoto has consistently challenged many of fashion's foundational assumptions— its trends, purpose, relationship to the body, and cultural roles. From the protective sanctuary of *Y3*, to the introspective deconstruction of *Pour Homme*, and then the utilitarian elegance of *Y-3*, it is clear that Yamamoto has unrelentingly pursued, and subsequently achieved, a singular aim: to create clothing that responds to human experience, rather than demands conformity to it.

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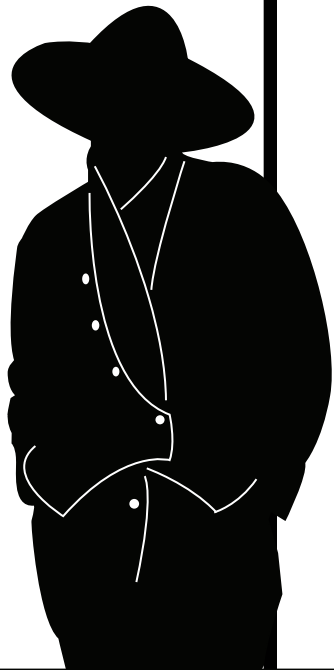
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This paper investigates, analyzes, and celebrates the work of Yohji Yamamoto, one of the fashion's most pioneering and enduring designers. Throughout his career, Yamamoto's body of work has radically challenged the preceding attitudes towards design, gender, and power that dominated haute couture throughout the 20th century. Therefore, the contents of this paper enrich the academic design community through a meticulous examination of Yamamoto's most influential works.



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