

Special Report

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Japanese style goes pop

By Lucille Craft
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TOKYO - The supernova known as Japan Inc. may be dimming as a manufacturing powerhouse.

But while its mainline industries surrender ground to South Korea and China, the planet's second-largest economy has re-emerged as a trailblazer in, of all things, pop culture.

Among the world's fashion and cultural elite, Japan is being compared with Paris of the 1920s, a magnet for and source of inspiration to the creative.

The epicenter of Japanese fashion is a few square blocks of west-central Tokyo known as Harajuku.

"France is not the fashion leader anymore," says Loic Bizel, a self-styled style-industry tour guide and market pulse-taker from Lyons.

"There are no trendsetters in France, except maybe big names like Dior."

The French, he said, "are very poor in terms of fashion, in terms of creativity, compared to Japan."

Harajuku is perhaps the one place on earth where every day is like Halloween and "outrageous" is the highest form of praise.

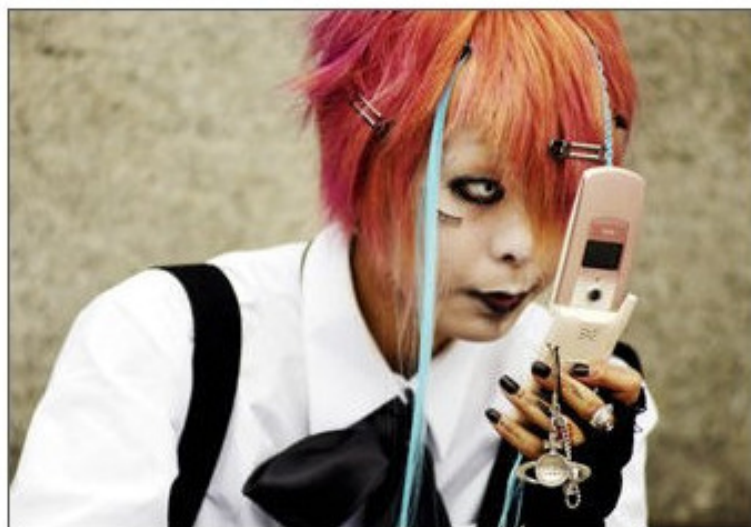
Day-Glo pink or green hair doesn't turn heads, nor do Shirley Temple flouncy petticoats or pandalike, black-and-white complexions or any mad assortment of tchotchkes, accessories and clothing.

The palate of Harajuku fashionistas is limited only to any time, any place, any genre.

Digital camera in hand, Mr. Bizel tirelessly prowls the streets of Harajuku, charting the cutting edge for his clients overseas.

He occasionally escorts foreign designers around the neighborhood. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the street-fashion fetishes concocted in Harajuku to turn up, months later, on the streets of New York or London.

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Shoko Hasegawa, 17, text-messages a friend near the Jingubashi Bridge in the Harajuku district in Tokyo. (THE WASHINGTON TIMES)

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