



Tokyo Lolita

Japan's Lolita look has swelled into a full-fledged subculture, one well enough established to have spawned several sub-subcultures, each with its own very precise nomenclature

BY ERIC TALMADGE
AP, TOKYO



The look is weird, and very Tokyo.

Growing up — forget it. Looking sexy, too. And appearing as though you might have a pulse? Better to glow blue like porcelain.

Or to break out the black lipstick.

Check out any place where young women hang out in Tokyo, and you are likely to find Lolitas. In fact, it's hard to miss them.

"People notice us — we stand out," said Sachi, the lead vocalist for Black Pansy, a two-woman band whose look, from poofy wigs to bright purple stockings, has made them the darlings of the Tokyo Lolita scene. "The pure, girl-like world inside of me, that is what Lolita is all about."

Tokyo can compete with any city in the world in terms of how many upscale boutiques sell the creations of the stars of fashion, the Versaces, the Dolce and Gabbanas, the Chaneles and Pradas. Japanese designers have made it in Paris, and, at home, Japanese are among the world's biggest consumers of brand-name fashion.

But Lolita thumbs its nose at Japan's fashion establishment.

The look is little girl, tea party cute, starting with black hair ribbons or tiny bonnets and moving to frilly dresses and thick platform boots or Mary Jane flats, often augmented with a lace umbrella to protect the as-milky-as-possible complexion on sunny days.

And it has swelled into a full-fledged subculture, one established enough to have spawned several sub-subcultures, each with its own very precise nomenclature, starting off with the classic Gothic Lolita — pale with dark lips in heavy makeup — and progressing through Elegant Lolita, Sweet Lolita — a poofy, doll-like look — Punk, Country and Black Lolita, wearing almost exclusively black from head to foot.

Designer Naoto Hirooka, whose brand h. Naoto is one of the main creative forces behind Gothic Lolita, said the whole Lolita look — like much of the anime culture with which it is intricately entwined — is an escape into a childish world of cute.

"I think many Japanese women feel intimidated by high fashion in the West and feel that they can never live up to the refined

beauty that they feel Western women strive for," he said. "So, instead, they shoot for a cute look, one that doesn't require tall, curvaceous bodies and instead emphasizes girlishness."

Hirooka said the escapism of Lolita is also a reaction against conformism and the expectations for young Japanese women to quietly assume their adult roles as wives or workers in this country's male-dominated society.

"One of the salient points about Lolita is that it is really a fashion that is not intended to attract men," he said. "The women are creating their own world into which they can get away from the pressures of the larger society."

In a very prissy way, Lolita is street fashion. Fumiyo Isobe, co-founder of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, a major Sweet Lolita brand name, said the style is inspired by Victorian porcelain dolls.

The idea, she said, is to dress as a child might have in London circa the late 1800s. Very little skin is exposed and the dresses tend to be about knee length, with long sleeves. Stockings or gloves cover legs and hands.

The variation spirals off from there, though the pursuit of cute — a recurring theme throughout Japanese youth culture, from Hello Kitty to French Maid cafes — is at the core of any Lolita look.

Lolita took off sometime in the 1980s and has gotten real traction in the past five years. But it has never moved far beyond its roots on the streets, or at tea parties and underground conventions, where its young faithful feel free to experiment with an eclectic variety of divergent Lolita elements that range wildly from the baby-like to the frighteningly ghoulish, a genre called grotesque Lolita, featuring makeup or bandages to give a wounded or sickly look to symbolize their victimization by society.

Although there is an "erotic Lolita" style as well, revealing a lot of leg, it is seen by many in the Lolita establishment as a kind of sellout — most Lolita looks are decidedly staid and prim, underscore the androgynous sexuality of children and are strongly intended to cater to the tastes of women, without worrying about the eyes of men.

By far the best-known Lolita subset is Gothic Lolita, which brings in a strong emphasis on black, ribbons and lace. The ensemble may — but doesn't have to — be set off by capelets, boleros, heart-shaped purses or hooded coats bearing bunny ears.

"It is very ambiguous," Hirooka said. "Sometimes I'm not sure what qualifies."

In large part because of the growing popularity of Japanese anime, there is an increasing interest in Gothic Lolita abroad.

Isobe's brand is now preparing for a show in San Francisco, and Hirooka, who dressed Evanescence lead singer Amy Lee for the 2004 Grammys, is testing the waters of Los Angeles.

The *Gothic & Lolita Bible* — a quarterly magazine with a circulation of more than 100,000 — began an English edition for sale in the US this year.

But Lolita isn't looking to take the world by storm.

Iconic as they are here, Lolita brands aren't designed for export — they are too fine-tuned to the frustrations of women in Japan, and their rebellion against them.

"I don't know if we can ever really hope to conquer foreign markets," Isobe said. "But I think Gothic Lolita is the best example there is of the 'Tokyo look.' We are really on the edge."

Clockwise from below: The Lolita subculture is a reaction against expectations for young Japanese women, and most Lolita styles are decidedly staid and prim; A woman sporting the Lolita look hangs out at a club in Tokyo; A DJ at a Tokyo club dressed Lolita-style.

PHOTOS: AP



The Audi A3: from zero to love in nine seconds

With a lush interior, sophisticated design and exhilarating drive, Audi's new convertible raises the benchmark for sporty cabriolets

BY MARTIN LOVE
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A lot can happen in nine seconds. It's the time it took Bayern Munich's Roy Makaay to score a goal against Real Madrid in the 2007 UEFA Champion's League. It's the time it took Usain Bolt to run 100m in New York in May. It's the time it took Harris Chan to break the world record for doing the Rubik's cube earlier this year. It's also the time that a student named Rich took to unclasp the bra straps of seven women (thank you, YouTube) and, if you are a quick reader, it's the time you have taken to read to this point.

More importantly, it's the time it takes the fabric roof to fold neatly into the trunk of Audi's sporty new compact cabriolet. That's quite a jump in the record stakes. It takes the BMW

1 Series convertible, the A3's only realistic competitor, a gasping and red-faced 22 seconds to convert — if that's the right word. The Astra Twin Top limps in at 30 seconds, while the Ford Focus CC takes a semi-comatose 35. You could open and shut the roof of the A3 almost four times in the eon of finger-drumming boredom the Ford takes. The latter two are folding hard tops rather than cloth tops, which give you the flexibility of an all-weather saloon and a convertible, but I've always found the lack of trunk space, the swollen rear end, the cramped back seats and the complexity of the opening mechanisms give you all the flexibility of a sergeant major at a passing-out ceremony.

The A3 can also cleverly open and shut its roof at speeds of up to 29kph.



The new Audi A3 convertible is presented at the 78th International Motor Show in Geneva earlier this year.

PHOTO: EPA

Many convertibles can do it at a crawl; plenty can only do it at a standstill. It may seem an unnecessary perk, but it's surprising how useful it is, especially in the city. On the basic model, the roof is only semi-automatic; you have to clamp and unclamp it yourself, which is only really a problem if you have just had a set of 8cm false nails stuck on. But the model I drove was fully automatic, so all you have to do is concentrate on not decapitating the kids. Or maybe that would be another bonus.

In the UK, Audi is on a mission to become the country's biggest-selling premium brand. Last year it sold 30,936 models compared to BMW's 33,326 and Mercedes-Benz's 23,003. And this new A3 will only confirm Audi's status. The build quality is outstanding. Week in, week out I am lucky enough to find myself behind

the wheels of some very posh cars, but slipping into the A3, you immediately sense that the benchmark has been raised. From the lush interior's tactile surfaces to the emotive, sophisticated design and the exhilarating drive, Audi ensures you feel you are in the poshest of company.

There are four engine options — two variants of the FSi gasoline and two direct-injection turbo diesels — and they all drive the front wheels. The Sport version with the 2-liter, 200bhp engine will do zero to 100kph in 7.3 seconds and has a top speed of 230kph.

So is the A3 cab for you? It is, Audi believes, if you are middle-aged, have children under 18, are more than likely a woman, and have a high level of education and income and other cars within the household.