

Lolita in Japan

AN INNOCENT GOTH

BY KATHRYN HARDY BERNAL



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Auckland Museum's exhibition *Loli-Pop* explores the Japanese Gothic and Lolita subculture and its relationship with popular culture. The most prominent face of the movement, the young woman who is Loli-Goth or Gothic Lolita, is characterised by her doll-like appearance, inspired by Rococo and frilly Victorian fashions of the little girl.

The cult of the Gothic Lolita has only recently appeared outside Japan but the phenomenon is not new to the Japanese. Ideas that have contributed to the style have been around since the 1970s and have evolved from movements such as Glam, Post-Punk, Neo-Romanticism and Goth.

The cult began to take hold in the 1990s, a time when Japan began to face a future fraught with economic instability. Some claim that these uncertainties have contributed to the rise of the Loli-Goth sensibility. The impulse to dress as a young girl is seen to reflect a subconscious desire to hang on to childhood security. Others dismiss the practice as infantile behaviour and merely another example of Japan's obsession with all things cute, or "kawaii".

Indeed, the many followers who admire the cuter aspects of the style inspire enthusiasm and the desire in the younger generation of Japanese women to become members of the Loli-Goth cult. Western fans profess similar motivations. While there is a sexual connotation associated with the term "Lolita" in the West, it is paradoxically the opposing element of childhood innocence that attracts Japanese participants.

Japanese-Californian student Leuren, aged 16, in a recent interview on the streets of Harajuku, said that what she likes about Lolita fashions is that she can dress in a rebellious way while being cute and pretty. Her comments were that she felt "feminine, like a girl, modest and not too scantily clad".

As with her Tokyo-based colleague, Erika (17) from Boston, Massachusetts, her interest initially came from the music. The genre that many Loli-Goths support, called Visual-kei ("visual style"), is represented by Japanese rock bands whose members are known for their heavily made-up and theatrical appearance. Favourites are Malice Mizer and Mois Dix Mois. However, Erika's attraction to Gothic and Lolita differs from her friend's, in that she appreciates the "mix between the Victorian influence and contemporary Goth".

Though reasons for becoming a Loli-Goth may vary, one association can certainly be read into the phenomenon. The Gothic Lolita rejects the Nabokovian undertones that may seem apparent to a Western audience and chooses to stay childlike and innocent, both in her manner of dress and play, which often includes the collection of dolls.

This exhibition looks at the strong relationship between the Loli-Goth and the Doll, with a display of Japanese Lolita dolls. This display is complemented by the highlight of the show, five full-sized garments, designed by AUT Fashion staff, Angie Finn, Yvonne Stewart, Lize Niemczyk, Gabriella Trussardi, Carmel Donnelly and Kathryn Hardy Bernal. The garments reflect a Western response to the Gothic and Lolita subculture.

* Kathryn Hardy Bernal, Curator of *Loli-Pop: A downtown view on Japanese street fashion*, is Lecturer in Fashion Theory at AUT University. She is currently researching towards her PhD on the Gothic & Lolita subculture, and the ideologies surrounding the phenomenon.