

From top to bottom:  
Hiroko Koshino collection  
b. eldest  
fashion designer

Michiko Koshino collection  
b. youngest  
fashion designer

# A Tale of Two Sisters

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IMAGES COURTESY HIROKO KOSHINO AND MICHIKO KOSHINO

The nice thing about fairy tales is the consistency of format. For instance, in the best bedtime stories it is the third child who goes further, brings back the greater treasure, and inherits the kingdom.

Fairy tales also, of course, have elements of fantasy and whimsy that prevent them from lining up too neatly with real life. Although she is the third daughter of a tailor and a dressmaker and she did leave her home far behind to seek her fortune in the wide world, fashion designer Michiko Koshino has by no means left her two sisters in the dust. Each—Hiroko, Junko, and Michiko—has responded differently to their shared upbringing, but all three have achieved stardom in the fashion world. What are the chances of that?









As it turns out, there isn't much chance involved. That's what makes real life more compelling than fairy tales. Hard work is a habit of mind and spirit for the Koshinos, instilled in them by their mother Ayako during their childhood in Kishiwada, a castle town near the merchant city of Osaka, in southwestern Japan. Ayako was widowed in World War II and supported the girls by sewing on a treadle machine at home to stock her Western dress shop. And Ayako was not just a shop owner. According to Michiko, "At the time, women in Japan still normally wore kimono. In an era when Western style clothes were rare, she was a fashion pioneer, [and] making the patterns herself, too."

Hiroko, the eldest daughter and a woman of Issey Miyake's generation, finished high school in the mid 1950s, coinciding with the birth of Japan's commercial fashion industry. She and her sisters all went on to graduate from Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo, Japan's first authorized vocational college of fashion, dating back to 1923. Bunka published the country's first fashion magazine and schooled some of the first Japanese designers to enter the Paris Collections. Hiroko spent several years designing clothing for young women at Ginza Komatsu, one of Tokyo's most fashionable department stores, before moving back to Kishiwada to help her mother with her shop. She taught fashion drawing on the side.

In Japan they say that a child's character is formed by the age of three. Children whose younger siblings are born after they reach this point are said to retain a sense of only-child autonomy and confidence. Hiroko was three when Junko, the second Koshino daughter, was born. The girls were constant competitors once they were older, but Junko's infant existence hardly impinged on the early formation of Hiroko's independent character; only three years after graduating from Bunka, Hiroko opened her own haute couture atelier, in the middle of Osaka, no less. In 1977, she began showing in Tokyo. In 1978 she was the first Japanese to participate in Alta Moda, in Rome. The Italian *Harpers' Bazaar* was so impressed they devoted 30 pages to her and her work. In 1982 she

began showing in Paris, where she continued to participate in the collections twice a year for the next decade.

Historically, Japan's design communities have benefited tremendously from the leadership of its luminaries. Hiroko Koshino seemed destined for the role of champion and supporter and stepped into these roles easily. In 1977, as she was showing for the first time in Tokyo, she joined other designers of stature in TD-6, a small creator-led organization meant to encourage the entire community of Japanese fashion designers. She was also one of the original members of the Council of Fashion Designers, formed in 1985. Constantly aware of how her upbringing in the lively, mercantile Kansai region of Japan had influenced her own vitality, Hiroko Koshino has worked hard to raise the fashion profile of Osaka, Kansai's largest city. At her suggestion the city hosted its first collections in 1986. And this year she is one of three cultural icons from the area to chair the Osaka Brand Strategy Promotion Conference, a government initiative to counter Tokyo's preeminence. As we were preparing this article, Hiroko was busy preparing for her exalted show in the first Japan Fashion Week, in which, finally, the collections will be shown in a limited time and space, in keeping with the norm around the world, a prospect that makes the international fashion media smile.

Hiroko is three years shy of 70. Her maturity is abundantly evident in her recent collections, with their confident pairing of innumerable elements of East and West; in her growing body of calligraphy, sumi-e, and painting, which she exhibits frequently; and in her collaborations with poets and other creators. She seems quite comfortable in the role of elder sister, not only to her siblings, but also to a whole new generation of fashion designers from Japan.

(Junko Koshino, the middle daughter, is also a fashion designer. She has participated in the Paris Collections since 1978, and owns boutiques in Paris, New York, Beijing, and Hanoi. Due to an extremely heavy pre-collection schedule, she gracefully declined to be interviewed by *Theme*.)





Michiko Koshino never saw her father's face, as he was killed in the war before she was born, but she grew up at her mother's side, helping the young widow Ayako with the sewing and selling of clothing. Did that seal her fate? Was she destined to go far away, to seek the greatest treasure and to attempt for the kingdom itself?

"I had no interest in clothing at all!" Michiko wrote to me in an email. "I watched my mother work, and because I normally had only my big sisters' hand-me-downs to wear, I did alter them myself, but during my school years, I was totally engrossed in tennis. I didn't study dressmaking at all."

By the time Michiko was attending the Bunka College of Fashion in the late '60s, her sisters were already becoming known as designers. There wasn't much room for her to grow. "I was starting to be treated [only] as Hiroko's or Junko's younger sister," she recalls. "I thought that if things went on this way, I would forever be wearing my older sisters' creations and being called 'little sister.'" In 1970 she graduated and worked full-time for her mother for two years, before deciding to go somewhere where no one knew her, someplace where she could "just live as 'Michiko.'" In 1973 she set off for London, alone.

Michiko wasn't meant to abandon the Koshino destiny. "Because I'd helped my mother all those years, the only things I knew how to do were clothing-related," she explains. She was fully prepared for a life of sculpting cloth, even if it was among the foreigners (most of them men) who populated her chosen new world. Inspired by the past of her innovative family, the traditions of her homeland and the bright future she saw, young Michiko began to experiment with marvelous new kinds of cloth, neoprene among them. She was the first to develop inflatable clothing and to market her own brand of condoms, which she introduced for the Aids Charity Foundation in 1993. (Benetton condoms came out in 1994.) Her use of exclusively Italian and Japanese denim is novel and part of her signature, but like her mother, Michiko harbors an expansive creativity. Her lines encompass club wear, streetwear, and haute

couture. She is known as a "fixture" on the London fashion scene, but has been participating in Seoul Fashion Week since 2003, and was the only non-Korean designer to show there this year.

Michiko's Spring/Summer 2005 Collection at London Fashion Week boasted some of the most reproduced images of the show, partially because of the intense drama of her textures and silhouettes but mainly because of their successful capture of *The Next Big Thing*, which no matter the difference in their styles, both big sister and little sister can claim. Michiko, perhaps under the influence of years among the literary English, provides stunning descriptions of her concepts and collections on her website, while Hiroko, more inclined towards the intuitive nature of Japanese expression, speaks through poetry and calligraphy. Still, the siblings share some essential terminology, based no doubt in the language of their upbringing.

As they have grown and prospered, the Koshino sisters have sometimes grown farther apart and sometimes quarreled, but more often they have laughed. Because they are in entirely different categories, professional critiques aren't of much use, but, "I don't think adult siblings are any different than they were as children," writes Michiko. "Especially we three: we grew up together, always competing. So we are always rivals and sisters, just as we have been since we were little. We compete with one another, but we also understand and respect one another."

When their dear mother had reached the age of 88, (in a joint exhibition unlikely to reoccur), the three sisters gathered together to show her the things they had made, the things that had brought them success in the worlds of their choosing. But soon they scattered across the globe again, each immersing herself in her own singular creations and in ever more invigorating collaborations with other bright stars of the boundless sky. ☸