

An impressionistic painting of a park scene. A wide, light-colored path leads from the foreground into the distance. On the left, there are dense green bushes and trees. On the right, a large, dark tree trunk is visible. In the background, a building with orange and blue sections is partially visible through the foliage. In the foreground, a person in a grey shirt and dark pants stands near two black chairs. Further down the path, two people are sitting on a bench; one is wearing a red jacket and holding a black umbrella. The overall style is painterly with visible brushstrokes.

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Coming of age in Tokyo by way of Seoul and Hawaii, fashion editor and stylist Sonya Park opened what was arguably the first lifestyle store to hit Japan's streets in 2003, with the launch of Arts & Science on a narrow alleyway in Daikanyama. We spoke with the concept store maven about her international upbringing, early influences, and why appreciating good design ultimately means letting go.

DUNG NGO: Let’s start at the very beginning... You were born in South Korea?

SONYA PARK: Yes, I was born in Seoul. I went to primary school there, and then my parents moved to Hawaii. In Korea at that time, in the ’70s, anyone who was educated worked for either the government or a big company, so my father was working for a big company; in Japan, we would call him a “salaryman.” My mother was on and off a working mother and a stay-at-home mother. Back then, if you went to a certain all-girl school, you married a guy from a certain university.

Because my father grew up during the Japanese occupation, he was very Japanese in many ways. He had all these things at home that he appreciated, and which were influenced by his Japanese education: He was into listening to classical music, and he liked Scandinavian furniture—it was really weird. I didn’t really see much of him from Monday to Friday, because he would work a lot. Whereas my mother, I think, always wanted to be American. There was a big American presence in Seoul, with the military, and we had a lot of foreigners living around us, so she had access to different things. Two of her sisters were in Hawaii, and she also had one in Japan. When the opportunity came to be with her sisters together in Hawaii, she somehow convinced my father to leave everything behind and move there, which was hard for him—it was very different. They had a pretty comfortable life, then all of a sudden, he had to start all new.

DN: At what age did you move to Hawaii?

SP: I remember it distinctively, because it was two days before my 13th birthday.

DN: That must have been difficult.

SP: My brother was three years older and he didn’t want to leave his friends. Whereas, I was like, *Whoa, let’s go! America!* I learned English really quickly. There was a huge community of Asian immigrants in Hawaii. Culturally, Hawaii is really midway between East and West, so it wasn’t that difficult for me.

DN: Did your interest in fashion start in Hawaii?

SP: When we were in Korea mother was raising me to be like the perfect First Lady: it was all about ballet lessons, piano lessons, and she loved shopping and getting new things. She always had her dressmaker make her a new coat, and I would always come along, so I got exposed to those things at an early age, and she always got me involved, asking which fabric I preferred. She continues to shop at malls in Hawaii.

My mom had very strict rules about me having straight hair and not wearing pastel colors, saying things like, “No Asians should wear pastel colors because we have dark hair.” And she also made me wear my brother’s old clothes and really boyish stuff, insisting that it suited me more, and I learn to feel very comfortable with it. When we moved to Hawaii it was the era of *Charlie’s Angels* and when I turned on the TV, I couldn’t relate to any of that, so I would go into the boys’ department to buy my clothes. My favorite outfit was a certain pair of jeans and a white pair of sneakers, but they had to be a very specific kind: pure-white, with no logo on them.

DN: When was the first time you felt really affected by fashion?

SP: When I saw Comme des Garçons for the first time, in San Francisco. I was 18 or 19, working part-time for this couple who owned a gift store in Honolulu—they were the first ones to bring Godiva to Hawaii, strange as it sounds. I don’t know what they saw in me, but one day the wife said, “I’m going to take you along on a buying trip. I think you might have something to say.” She wore a lot of Japanese designers, and on our way to New York, we stopped in San Francisco. Did you know the Comme des Garçons store there? It was gray, very minimalist, and I couldn’t walk out of the store without buying anything; I had to buy something. So I bought a pair of socks—the only thing I could afford. I was introduced to Japanese fashion from magazines and publications, but it was really my first time seeing it live. I thought, *Oh, I have to go to Japan*. That was the beginning of my obsession with Tokyo.

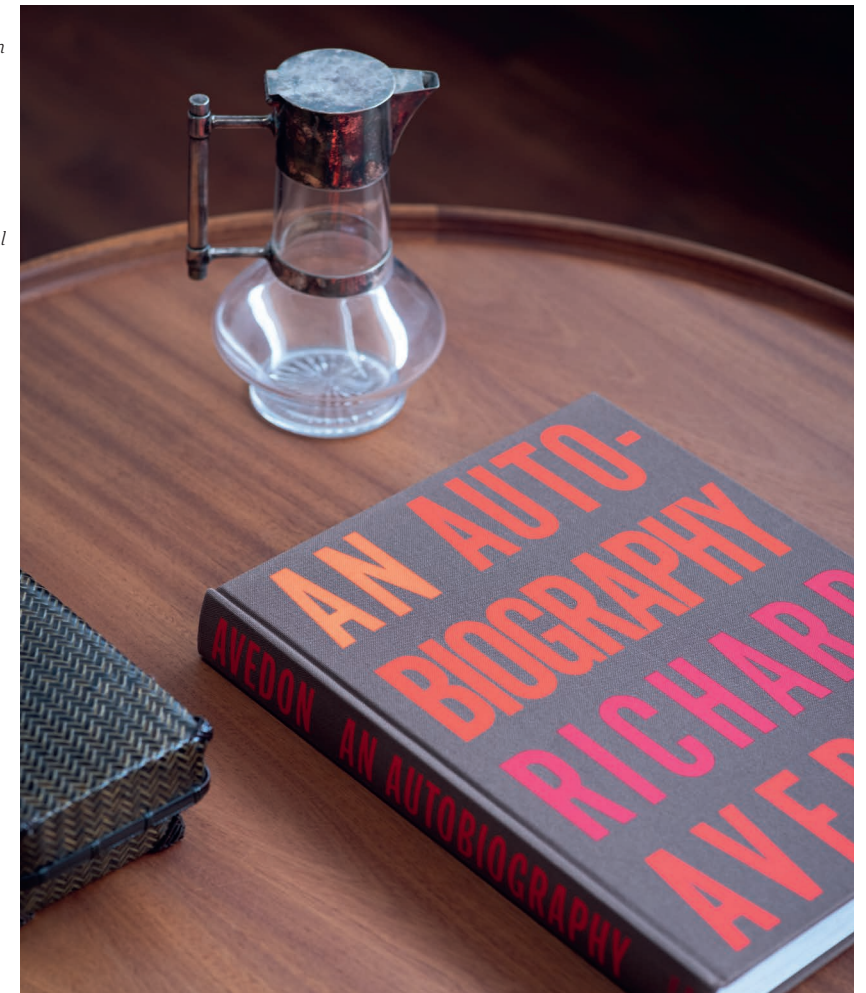






THIS PAGE: Park's home are filled with both Japanese and Western objects that caught her eye. A Christopher Dresser water pitcher sits with a signed book by Richard Avedon.

OPPOSITE: The tansu in Park's kitchen are filled with traditional Japanese ceramics as well as new porcelain from Astier de Villatte, one of the brands that Park introduced to Japan.



DN: So from Hawaii, instead of turning east to New York or Europe, you turned west to Japan?

SP: Yes. Even when I first came to Japan in 1987, everyone said, "You're in the wrong place. You should be in Paris or New York or London. Why are you here?" As for me, I had no second thoughts. I just thought that the aesthetic was so much more unique.

DN: What was your first job in Tokyo?

SP: Funny enough, I was teaching English. I have to say, when you go to a new place at a certain age, you kind of lose your mother tongue. I speak Korean, but I wouldn't be able to write a thesis with Korean. I could watch a movie and be fine. I still communicate with my father in Korean. So English was still my second language, and I had another language—Japanese—but at that time, if you spoke English well enough, you could get a teaching job.

I wanted to get into magazines, and because this was during the bubble economy, there were many

opportunities. You could just open up a newspaper and find the classified section. I went to this interview with a new publisher. This was before the Internet, so these Japanese publishers would go to Europe and then come back and publish this huge book of photos from the fashion shows, and sell them for a lot of money to the little Japanese brands that would just knockoff the looks.

They were making a lot of money with that, so they decided to make a magazine. I wanted to get involved, and the company was still small enough that I could talk to my boss into letting me do some pages. It was difficult, but because I really worked hard at whatever I did, I always kind of stood out. And for people who did not want to work that hard, I was a sorry sight because the boss would say to them, "She's willing to go that far. Why isn't everyone else doing what she's doing?" I don't know what happened, but my boss called me in one day and actually I got canned for working too hard, I think



OPPOSITE: Park's new Arts & Science shop in Daikanyama is in a renovated house, where surfaces are stripped and new finishes are added.

because the other people were upset. Of course, he came back about three days later and said I didn't have to go, but I said, "No, I have to go and find a new job." I was thinking of just doing freelance—but then the bubble economy burst, and it was very, very difficult to find freelancing jobs.

DN: Is this when you had the idea to open up a shop? Or was that something you had always wanted to do?

SP: I have always loved the whole experience of shopping. In Korea, when I was young, in the '60s and the '70s, there were no cultural events; I don't think we even had a proper museum there yet. It was a military regime. Once the Japanese left, there was maybe one department store, and my mother went there religiously. So, for me, it was a place of beauty—and shopping was like an experience that was so out of the ordinary. I always loved walking into that store. And there was another store in Hawaii that was called Carol & Mary... which was probably owned by people named Carol and Mary[*laughs*]. It was when the wealthy Californians were relocating to Hawaii. It was this beautiful shop, a good old-fashioned American style, with chandeliers and a perfume counter—it almost looked like Bergdorf Goodman but on a smaller scale; they also sold fur in Hawaii. Very wealthy ladies traveled to colder places, and they had a vault in the back for them, where they would keep the fur. And then if you bought something, they would package it with this ribbon and bag.

I think that's where my thing of wanting to own a store and create something like that may have come from. Or maybe it's from around the time I worked on the runway look books, in Tokyo. Because in that kind of publishing work, you learn that there are advertisers and there are rules that you have to follow, and there is not a total freedom, your creative output was always decided by someone else, even if you were working in something creative like fashion: There's the editor and the photographer, and sometimes you couldn't get the right model. A lot of it was left to chance, and I

didn't like that uncertainty. I'd finding myself thinking, *if only I could take responsibility for the whole thing... running my own store might be a good place for that*. Later on, of course, I learned that you never get total control of anything. There's always someone dictating something—

DN: —but it's a lot more control, more than most jobs.

SP: Exactly. And at first, I didn't have to make a living off of the first store because I was still doing a lot of freelance work—it was like a hobby and I could support it. The concept of the first store was "everything behind closed doors": I was only selling towels and pajamas and Santa Maria Novella products. It was the size of this living room and that was the only space I could afford. But I had antiques—it was very European-looking, but even in Europe, this kind of store didn't exist. So it was my interpretation of the old, but I made it into this kind of new shop. Everyone who walked into the store really loved it. It just took time to really take off.

DN: So you were really the first in Tokyo to open a multi-brand lifestyle and concept store.

SP: It was probably one of the first ones. And I didn't know, I just wanted to make a store where I would want to go and shop myself. And then people were coming in and buying this little production of clothing that I was making based on vintage pieces. I was selling vintage clothes I'd brought back from Paris and they were just flying off the rack. I'd think, oh my god, I'll never have that piece again, I should have held onto it for the shape. And when I kept the shape, I thought, maybe I can reproduce it with old fabric. I would buy 10 or 20 meters at a time, and then I thought, maybe if I make a little bit more, I can sustain myself with the clothing. Because I was a fashion editor and fashion stylist, and I think people expected more fashion from me. Also, I don't think they were ready yet for a home and lifestyle shop: I was 15 years too early. Now, stores like that are everywhere.





THIS PAGE: The wooden columns of the original structure are stripped and left bare, showing its history as a domestic space.





So Daikanyama was the first store, I wanted to have a store with goods and things, just products and towels, great pajamas, and underwear. Because that was really when fashion was interesting, and I thought, my god, there are so many people who are doing this really well, why would I ever go into fashion? I was very happy being able to surround myself with different designers. But if I opened a fashion store and started to make clothes, I would have to give up the freedom, and control...

DN: Were you still freelancing at the time?

SP: At around that time, I got hired by Comme des Garçons to do in-house styling. I remember looking at the bank statement, and I don't know what I did with those paystubs, but I got paid by Comme des Garçons and it was like, oh my god, they're paying *me*. I'm not buying from *them*. And then, I met Rei and thought, "Oh, my God, I can't believe now I know Rei." She was actually the first one who bought from Arts & Science for Dover Street Market; so that was a kickstart for me. She my hero and then here she was, giving me a helping hand.

DN: This was 15 years after you first visited the CDG store in San Francisco?

SP: Yeah, more—maybe 20. When I think about it now, it was like a dream come true.

DN: Where did the name Arts & Science come from?

SP: I was thinking one day: "What am I going to name the store?" At my first store, the concept was about towels and soaps, and I thought, "You need science for everything you do. If you wanted to paint, you needed the science for the paint." I always thought that anything you do in life, it's a balance between art and science. And I think we're just a product of arts and science in what we do. When I was at the University of Hawaii, the arts and science departments were in the same building. And then it looked nice as a graphic. I

just used that and have the round logo like a university logo. It was a bit of a parody as well.

DN: But it speaks to balance as well as breadth, meaning that you have envisioned a complete platform—not just arts, and not just science.

SP: If you wanted an analogy, art would be desire and science would be function. It's not one more than the other. We surround ourselves with that balance of desire and function. We need to, right?

DN: Desire and function, that's nice. So how many stores do you have now? Between Tokyo, Kyoto—

SP: I keep forgetting, because some of them are like galleries. One of them is a gallery and one of them is a cafe. I think eleven. And when you say eleven, you think: "Oh, my God, so many..." You've been to Japan many times and you've seen the stores. They're tiny. What is the advantage? First of all, I couldn't afford a big store in the beginning. It was too expensive. With a small space, even if you spend money per square meter, it's cheaper, so you can make something very special. Whereas if it's a bigger space, it becomes very expensive. I think in a smaller space you can concentrate more on details. I love details: It's getting the right materials, and instead of having paint you have plaster, which is so much cozier than just a color. Those kinds of things are made more accessible by having a smaller space, and you can have stores exclusively devoted to certain things: clothing, household accessories, design, a lot of local Japanese craft.

DN: What's next for you?

SP: Oh, I love doing spaces. If I were to start all over again, maybe I would have been an architect or an interior designer, or something like designing for the stage. Just making a good product is not enough for me. I want the whole package, which is where to put the things.

OPPOSITE: A new fireplace is added to the space to evoke its past as a private home. Lacquered chopsticks, wooden fork, and spoon were produced by Park for the Noma restaurant Tokyo pop-up in 2015.



OPPOSITE: Park published a book of her favorite places to shop, eat, and visit in Tokyo after her private list became a much coveted document shared by friends.

DN: Well, I think you are *de facto* an architect and an interior designer already, with all the stores you have opened. I know you work with architects and designers, but it's your vision and it's your aesthetic.

SP: Well, thank you. This is why I think it's really difficult for me to work with a really established architect. [Kazuyo] Sejima-san, who I adore and respect, designed that apartment I rent in Kyoto, and although it's great I wouldn't be happy if someone purposely designed that for me. I would have to change so much. I think it's always the younger people who are more open-minded and who are willing to collaborate.

But now maybe I'm ready, because I've outgrown this house [we are in now]. I would like to have a guest room. I'm getting older and I'd like to host more. I don't want a bigger space. It's going to be kind of the same size but with more of the designer's personal character, in Japanese we say *kosei*. What is the word in English...

DN: ... maybe imprint, or signature.

SP: Yes. I want more of an imprint of that person, and I need to take a chance if it's a good imprint... Someone recently asked me, "What do you think is a good design?" And I said: "A design that can overcome function because it's so beautiful, although it's less functional." With the architect of the new house, I said: "You have the freedom for the store, because it has a function. But the home, I have a few things that I really need and just go ahead and see what you can come up with." I'm ready...

DN: The ultimate maturity of a design person is to let go.

SP: Yes, I want to let go. And I'm waiting for that day and maybe I would be ready for Sejima-san—a little house would be incredible—but right now, it'd more likely be a second home or like a teahouse or something like that. If she could design one, it would be incredible.

DN: Well, I look forward to visiting that one day. +

