

## Kitty and the Bulldog: Lolita fashion and the influence of Britain

Review by Novuyo Moyo, Laura Blair and Ayesha Singh

On 5th May 2012 the Victoria and Albert Museum was host to a group of over 100 Lolitas for an event alongside the **Kitty and the Bulldog** exhibition, celebrating the Lolita fashion subculture and its variants. If there's one thing to know about the followers of this fashion trend, it's that they never go unnoticed! First originating in the Harajuku district of Japan, the trend takes its main influence from the high necklines and modest hemlines of Victorian Britain, over a century after the era ended and nearly six thousand miles away. Given the roots of Lolita in the Victorian era, it seemed only fitting for the Lolitas to hold their tea party at the V&A (despite the rain), complete with a visit to the exhibition itself.

Despite originating in Japan, online forums have created a community of dedicated Lolitas from all around Britain, co-ordinating and attending events around the country. As Aliko, one of the girls we spoke to noted, since the rise of the internet the subculture has spread and developed rapidly over the last decade, whereas previously the fashion was limited to specific magazines such as the Gothic and Lolita Bible quarterly. Since the increase of the trend's popularity, Japanese retailers began shipping overseas and the trend has transformed into one of a more elastic variety - some of the Lolitas that we spoke to said that they now seldom follow the 'rules' of the trend, instead adapting them in order for their outfits to reflect their individual personalities.

We spoke to some of the Lolitas about their fashion choices, and found that there are plenty of dos and don'ts in the world of Lolita fashion. All of them spoke about the importance of quality of the material, helping to distinguish the fashion as a style, as opposed to a costume. There are many websites detailing the typical 'anatomy' of a Lolita outfit: all are insistent on the hemline being no shorter than slightly above the knee. With the focus being on modesty and prettiness, the Lolitas generally wear gloves, tights or frilly socks, beautiful headpieces and jewellery, and adorn their dresses with lace. Bloomers are also generally seen as requisite - one of the Lolitas exclaimed, 'I'm not wearing them now, but I should be!'



There is the obvious connection with Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which one of the girls acknowledged could be seen to be a worry for some who don't know the trend. She commented that despite knowing the trend had nothing to do with the novel, the verbal association sometimes made her nervous because her boyfriend is a little older than her. On seeing a *Lolita* for yourself, though, there is no doubt that the style focuses on modesty and prettiness, not on emulating extreme youth. Marlie, Charlotte and Veronica spoke about presumptions made about them simply because of their dress. Many might assume that *Lolitas* tend to be art students, but there was a range of professions across them. They also spoke about people touching their clothing or taking pictures without asking, or presuming that they were wanting attention (no matter negative or positive) because of their style, and being asked strange questions like 'Are you Dutch?' or 'Is it your birthday?'. However, for a trend which may outwardly seem so extreme, reactions the *Lolitas* described were on the whole incredibly positive. All of the *Lolitas* were unanimous in one area: elderly ladies are big fans of the *Lolita* fashion, often commenting on its prettiness and modesty. The *Lolitas* certainly attracted a lot of positive attention at the museum!

We were curious to know a little more about their individual styles and how they first discovered it was something they were interested in. The ways that the *Lolitas* had come to find the fashion varied greatly. A 25-year-old illustrator was researching quirky trends for her fashion designs when she came across the style, fell in love with feeling 'cute and modest' and has never looked back. Though dressed as a 'Classic' *Lolita* for the tea party, her general style is that of a 'Gothic' *Lolita*, which she interchanges with other alternative styles such as Fairy Kei and Gyaru. However, she felt that once she reached 25 she might have to 'graduate' from the alternative styles. A lot of the *Lolitas* seemed to feel this way, but one *Lolita* told us that at 30 she'd decided to throw all her 'normal' clothes away, and become a full time *Lolita*! Another *Lolita* cited that her interest came from watching the Harajuku Girls in Gwen Stefani's music videos. A classic *Lolita* from Bath felt that the immediate aesthetic appeal of the clothes was what drew her to the style - a sentiment echoed by many of the others. Many of the *Lolitas* said that they had been led to the style through Goth and anime websites, finding the classic tailoring and instantly recognisable silhouette exciting and different from the high street, whose clothes are 'not really made for an hourglass shape' as one of them rightly pointed out.

Visitors at the museum on the day were extremely appreciative of the *Lolitas* and their outfits, complimenting them and asking for pictures. If you weren't there don't feel like you missed out!

The V&A's **Kitty and Bulldog** exhibition displays the many types of *Lolita* dress and its history in the Toshiba Gallery. It is up until 27<sup>th</sup> January 2013, so there's plenty of time to go enjoy this fascinating fashion trend.

### **Kitty and the Bulldog: Lolita fashion and the influence of Britain**

23 April 2012 – 27 January 2013 The Toshiba Gallery, room 45, Free admission

Novuyo Moyo, Laura Blair and Ayesha Singh are members of CreateVoice, V&A's Young People's collective.