

# In Japan, masking the everyday

By Elizabeth Heilman Brooke

## TOKYO

Each, plum and cherry blossoms are becoming windswept memories, but their buds have ushered in a street rap of "Ah-choo! Ker-choo! Sniff, sniff," signaling that the spring allergy and cold season is here.

During these sorry days of sneezing and wheezing, a small mask of stark white gauze is the key fashion accessory for the watery-eyed and unwell. How frightening! How conspicuous! How incredibly uncool in this capital of cool!

Those colorless masks serve as merely one Japanese source of whimsical inspiration for a young Dutch designer who has brought lions and tigers and pigs to Tokyo's posh avenues.

Samira Boon, a 29-year-old architect and designer, in Tokyo on a research scholarship, has produced a number of lines of fashionable accessories based on remarkably simple Japanese concepts: antiseptic masks, the creative folding of lightweight cloth to carry a bundle, cushions that double as earthquake head protection all caught Boon's eye.

When she first saw these medical masks, she said, she "was struck by the contrast. Everything in Japan is so well designed, and people are generally so very style-conscious, and yet these masks look so serious. If you don't feel well, isn't it better to make yourself feel relaxed?" She added, "Masks make people curious, make us wonder who is behind the mask."

So Boon sat down at her computer image bank and brought up an animal farm of mug shots: goats and sheep, cats and hippos, gorillas, jaguars and seals. Even a rodent mouth has been ironed onto boring gauze and is now sold at some of Japan's and the Netherlands' boldest contemporary art museums.

The daughter of a landscape architect and a biologist, Boon was born in Zeist, the Netherlands, and graduated from Delft University of Technology in 2002. She came to Tokyo in 1999, as an architectural intern for the Sakakura Atelier in Roppongi. After graduation, she returned to Tokyo under a scholarship and spent a year as a research student in the department of architecture at the Institute of Technology, Japan's "combination of the traditional and the high tech" was the attraction, and she loved "the energy of the big city."

Boon considered the "sterile look-



Boon's decorated masks replace the usual gauze protector.

ing white gauze mask" her inspiration to create something just as functional, but a bit more "cheerful and funny." Her Get Well Soon masks come in as many as 15 variations on whiskers, snouts, beards and ruby-painted lips. One mask has the face of a geisha printed on it; another provides a zipper so one can eat.

She has brought a witty eye to a traditional concept and provided accessorizing opportunities not merely to mask germs, but to transform one's visage.

Boon's sense of humor and hip ingenuity can also be seen in other designs. Her Furoshiki Shiki is a set of transparent vinyl bags that were inspired by Edo-period cloth wrappers, furoshiki, used to wrap bundles and gifts. At the public bath, furo, bathers would spread out, shiki, their belongings on a simple, but gracefully decorated cloth: furoshiki. Boon was attracted to the furoshiki's efficiency, but also wanted to produce a "pure" bag, "plain and simple," that would not require assembling several elements.

Her neon-colored bags are made of a single sheet of semi-transparent film that is made into bags of various sizes by folding the plastic and making use of the adhesive qualities of plastic hitting plastic. A large bag can hold a decent sized notebook or a laptop.

Medium and smaller bags are folded into rectangular shapes and can hold a cell phone, cosmetics, calling cards and cash. The transparency of the material allows for playful color combinations. These sleek wrappers come in hot shades of yellow, pink, orange, green and blue. Boon is working on a new design to be made of traditional kimono fabric held together by a chopstick or hair ornament.

Other experiments in twisting and

transforming cloth are her Moon Friends and Zip-Zap designs. Cushions that double as everyday seats and head protection in the event of an earthquake captivated Boon. She appreciated the fact that the function of the cushions is not fixed, and she began to play with images that might appeal to the imagination of a child.

The moon is often a symbol of fantasy, so Boon took circles of padded felt, zippered them together to form a cushion, and told children, "If you sit on the moon, everything is possible." As children played with the zippers, the flaps of the moon became head-dresses, tunnels for secrets and even padded safety helmets.

Zip-Zap takes the zipper play ever further. Six pieces of cloth — two squares and a band divided into four pieces — zip and unzip into innumerable combinations to create a handbag, T-shirt, skirt, apron or scarf. Zip-Zap is still in the development phase as Boon searches for appropriate fabrics that will repel dirt (for an apron), and provide a balance between stiffness (for a cushion or handbag) and looseness (for a T-shirt).

Boon's designs are now sold in Tokyo, Karuizawa, Osaka, Amsterdam and Utrecht. Her masks cost ¥600, about \$5.50. The small bags cost from ¥500 to ¥1,500, and the big bags go for ¥4,000.

The offbeat designs based on very familiar Japanese concepts have been warmly received here.

Masks are mostly purchased as novelty gifts and no masked menagerie has overrun Tokyo trains and subways, but Boon held two very popular Flying to the Moon mask workshops at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo's Shinjuku neighborhood. Mask makers from 2 to 60 years old sat for hours gluing whiskers and feathers, glitter and sequins onto rectangular germ-shielding masks.

Boon said that people often remark that they never imagined using a chopstick in such an unconventional way or making a fashion statement with such a humble piece of fabric.

"Perhaps because I have a certain distance from these traditions, I feel more freedom to play with them," she said. "I like to take things out of their usual context."

Boon's logo is very subtly pressed into her Furoshiki Shiki. It is a cartoon eye.

Her wink at a culture she has come to love.