FOR ISSEY MIYAKE, who remains one of the most experimental and enduring designers in fashion, truly great design goes beyond changing the way we dress or how we decorate our homes—it's about liberating the mind and igniting ideas. In 1965, Miyake arrived in Paris from Japan to study haute couture. And for a few years, he did just that. In his classes at the Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture, he learned how to tailor a perfect jacket and sew a perfect cocktail dress. It was all very refined, bourgeois and expected. Then came the Paris strikes of 1968, when French students protested everything that represented the postwar establishment. For Miyake, the riots were an awakening. "I realized that the future was in making clothing for the many, not the few," says the 74-year-old. "I wanted to make clothing that was as universal as jeans and T-
For more than 40 years, Miyake has dedicated himself to the notion that fashion can be universal and affordable while still being innovative. Among his achievements are Pleats Please, a relatively inexpensive, easy-care line of colorful clothes inspired by the pleated tunics of ancient Greece—this fall, Taschen is publishing *Pleats Please Issey Miyake*, celebrating the line’s 20th anniversary—and A-POC, an even less costly line of clothes made out of a single piece of lightweight knitwear that the customer can alter with scissors.

Miyake’s impact on the design world goes far beyond the insular confines of avant-garde fashion. He’s created costumes for choreographer William Forsythe and designed the black turtlenecks that were Apple impresario Steve Jobs’s signature. (Jobs would specify the neck and sleeve lengths down to the millimeter and order hundreds at a time.) In 1999, he allowed his friend, the leading Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, to sprinkle gunpowder in the shape of dragons on an assortment of Miyake clothes and then ignite them, burning traces of the images on the fabric. While Miyake may see himself as a creator, he once said, “I’m disturbed when people call me an artist. When I make something, it’s only half finished. When people use it—for years and years—then it is finished.”

In 2007, he opened Japan’s first design museum, 21_21 Design Sight (a play on 20/20 vision) with the architect Tadao Ando, a longtime friend. “Design is so much a part of Japanese life, but we had no museum where we could showcase new work and where young artists and designers could come into contact with design from other places,” he says of the initiative. “The future of creativity lies in fostering traditional handcrafts while using new technology to make them modern.” To this end, he founded a consortium called the Reality Lab and two years ago launched their first project: 132 5. Issey Miyake, a line of clothing and home accessories, each made of a single piece of recycled polyester folded in precise geometric shapes—like origami. When not in use, the items collapse and become perfectly flat and two-dimensional.

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Born and raised in Hiroshima, Miyake discovered the empowering effect of design in a way he could never have imagined. On his way to a class trip at the age of 7, he witnessed the dropping of the atomic bomb. “I can’t say that any one experience makes you who you are,” Miyake once said. “I can say that I have always been a person who doesn’t look back and who is always thinking of tomorrow.” A few years later, after suffering a bone-marrow disease that left him with a permanent limp, Miyake turned to the optimism of design that was cropping up around a city being built anew—particularly that of Isamu Noguchi, who created what are now known as the Peace Bridges in Hiroshima. “I experienced great design as a youngster, not as an object of desire but, physically, as something to be used,” he has said.

He studied graphic design at Tama Art University in Tokyo before moving to Paris to attend fashion school in 1965. There, he apprenticed under Guy Laroche and Hubert de Givenchy, whose houses made glamorous dresses for women like Audrey Hepburn and the Duchess of Windsor. Following a brief move to New York to work for Geoffrey Beene, Miyake returned to Tokyo in 1970 to open his own design studio. He began, he says, “to
explore the idea of making clothing from a single piece of cloth—the relationship and space between cloth and the human body.” His conceptual fashion, which he presented in Paris in 1973, caused a mini-revolution during an otherwise staid French fashion week.

Despite 25 more years of critical accolades, Miyake continued to question his motivations. Though he had dedicated himself to “making clothes for the people, not to be a top couturier in the French tradition,” he still felt that he had become a “society designer,” to his disappointment. His response, in 1999, was to step back from his ready-to-wear design duties, handing the reins to one of his young designers in order to focus on a new project: A-POC, which stands for A Piece of Cloth, a revolutionary seamless tubelike fabric. The idea was to create something affordable that customers could easily alter themselves. A-POC was unveiled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1999: Two dozen models walked down a runway, all connected by a long tube of fabric, and received an uproarious ovation. New York's Museum of Modern Art acquired a similar piece—the first industrial product by a clothing designer in its permanent collection.

In recent years, Miyake has received his share of awards, including, in 2006, the prestigious Kyoto Prize, for advances in science, culture and human spirit; in 2010, the Order of Culture, presented by the Emperor of Japan; and, earlier this year, London’s Design Museum fashion award, for 132 5. Issey Miyake, beating out Kate Middleton’s wedding gown and the blockbuster “Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty” exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While Miyake is proud of these honors, they don't define him. He still works with and teaches young people, telling them, he says, “To be curious, explore the world, respect tradition, experiment with technology, embrace modernity and never look back.” When asked what he is most proud of in his career, he laughs and responds: “My next project.”