

Issey Miyake has been part of fashion's evolution toward art

by Peter Rowe

In the early 1960s, as protests rocked college campuses around the world, a Japanese newspaper printed an angry letter from a Tokyo university student. The source of the writer's fury?

The media's insistence that fashion design was silly, frivolous, unworthy of serious coverage.

"He was interested in being a designer, the letter said, and he didn't intend to feel second-class about it, either," *Time's* critic Jay Cocks reported years later.

Now 68, clothes designer Issey Miyake no longer has to argue his case.

"In the United States, we tend not to put designers on that pedestal," said Pamela Fiore, editor in chief of *Town & Country*. But in Japan, "Miyake is someone who has always been seen as an artist."

Recently, Miyake addressed an audience at the University of San Diego's Shiley Theatre as part of the ceremonies celebrating the 2006 Kyoto Prize recipients. The prizes recognize individuals who have made world-class contributions to their disciplines.

"As 20th century art moved beyond and transcended traditional genres," the Kyoto Prize citation reads, "Mr. Miyake's accomplishments made possible the recognition that clothing designs are, without doubt, a legitimate art form."

Without doubt. Take that, newspaper editors.

COGS AND WHEELS

Is clothing art? In the world of pop art, that question is settled. Once an enclave of the idle rich, couture is now discussed and dissected - if not worn - by the masses. On TV, "Project Runway" and "America's Next Top Model" are devoured by millions. "The Devil Wears Prada," the best-selling novel, became a hit film spiced by Meryl Streep's Oscar-nominated turn as a fashion magazine's tyrannical editor.

ISSEY MIYAKE - Issey Miyake, seen here wearing his Kyoto Prize, is a hot commodity in fashion circles. CNS Photo.

The "Devil" and the two hit TV shows are frothy fantasies, but a large cast of real-life designers have become household names. There's Coco Chanel and Yves St. Laurent, Bill Blass and Ralph Lauren, Giorgio Armani and Donna Karan. We could go on.

We could not, however, include Miyake. He stands apart, or perhaps above our society's celebrity-molding machinery.

His clothes, certainly, resist easy interpretation. They are wearable paradoxes, symphonies of loose, flowing lines conducted by tightly focused technology. Most fashion comes and goes with the seasons; Miyake's work ignores the calendar and goes its own way.

"Miyake did not follow the vagaries, the trends of fashion," said Michelle Tolini, who teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design. "If you look at what he has created since the 1970s, little is connected to the basic trends, the things you see coming down the runway."

If Miyake ignores trends, he's also uninterested in polishing his public image. With the media, he can be philosophical and self-effacing to the point of detachment. Consider these excerpts from a recent e-mail exchange with a newspaper reporter:

Q: Have Western designers taken your aesthetic and built on it? If so, who?

A: I hope I have made some contribution and influence to those who have followed me. After all, I have been working in this field for quite some time.

Q: What do you feel about the corporatization of fashion, of fashion houses that have been bought up by large conglomerates? How does this shape fashion?

A: It is unfortunate that creativity has been lost like a small cog in a large wheel named commerce.

LESSONS IN PARIS

Miyake was born on April 22, 1938, in Hiroshima. That time and place raise obvious questions.

They do not, however, elicit the expected responses.

"I can't say that any one experience makes you who you are," Miyake replied when asked about his wartime memories. "However, I can say that I have always been a person who doesn't look back, and who is always thinking of tomorrow."

Others, though, maintain that the Miyake family lived two miles from Ground Zero and that 7-year-old Issey witnessed the mushroom cloud boiling over his hometown.

Miyake, though, stresses the significance of another moment from his childhood. As a boy, he stumbled upon his sister's stash of fashion publications. "I loved the photographs and graphics in the American and French magazines that I saw at that time; they were great sources of inspiration to me."

This inspiration led him to Tokyo, where he enrolled in Tama Art University. The school was rebuilding - the 1945 bombing raids had incinerated the original lecture halls - and expanding. At Tama, fabric design was regarded as part engineering, part sculpture and all deserving of respect.

If Tokyo newspapers needed to be reminded of that fact, this was not true in another world capital. After graduating, Miyake decamped for Paris. Within five years, he had worked for a trio of greats: Guy LaRoche and Hubert de Givenchy, both Frenchmen, and an American original, Geoffrey Beene. These were postgraduate seminars in professional and personal style. "Monsieur de Givenchy, in particular, taught me a great deal in two aspects; simply because of his gracious personality as well as his dignity of clothes/clothes making."

In 1970, Miyake returned to Tokyo. When he came back to Paris in 1973, it would be to show a collection from the house of Issey Miyake.

EXTREME DEMANDS

Are Miyake's clothes art?

Yes, if you trust New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the Costume Institute has collected five of his pieces.

Yes, if you listen to Town & Country's Fiore. "His clothes are as intricate as origami," she said.

Yes, if you believe that art is something that stands the test of time. "He makes the kinds of things that will last for 30 years and never look out of style," said Tolini, who specializes in 19th and 20th century design history.

If Miyake has a taste for classic lines, he is also fascinated by cutting-edge technology. In 1991, the Frankfurt Ballet asked Miyake for lightweight costumes with permanent pleats. The designer started with oversized garments, folded them again and again, slipped them between sheets of paper and pressed them at high heat. This process places extreme demands on the fabric - silk was found to be unusable, as its pleats unravel when submerged in a washing machine or drenched in a downpour - so Miyake settled on polyester.

The resulting Pleats Please line was a hit with the Frankfurt ballet and women around the world.

"You can wear them on an airplane and they don't wrinkle," Fiore said. Or just stuff your Pleats Please outfit into your suitcase. "It retains its shape," insisted Tolini.

In 1998, Miyake unveiled the successful results of another experiment. This one flowed from his meditation

on a central question facing all designers, "how to wrap a three dimensional form, such as the body, using a two dimensional material."

One radical answer: A-POC, or A Piece of Cloth. With Dai Fujiwara, he created entire wardrobes that were woven into a single, massive roll of knit fabric. Each blouse or pair of pants could be "extruded by cutting along the surrounding lines of demarcation for each item," Miyake explained.

FAMILY ALTARS

Today, Miyake's touch extends far beyond clothing. He lends his name and vision to scent, luggage, bicycles, chairs. This is true of many designers, who have discovered a strong international hunger for their branded products.

Nowhere is this desire stronger than in Miyake's native country. "In Japan today," he said, "to own an expensive brand item with a logo is almost akin to having a family altar, which has a place of honor in every Japanese household."

Commercial success, though, has not lessened his artistic ambitions. Later this month, a combination multimedia museum and studio known as 21 21 Design Site will open in Tokyo. The monumental structure was created by Tadao Ando, an architect and 2002 Kyoto Prize recipient; one of its directors is Issey Miyake.

Blending a world's worth of influences, fashioning creations that are beautiful, useful and comfortable - that's an art.

"There are wonderful sources of technology, crafts, and different traditions of making things, not only in Tokyo, but also all of Asia," Miyake said. "I think by harnessing those strengths, we have the potential to create some wonderful partnerships and collaborations with the West."

THE KYOTO PRIZE

Established in 1984, the Kyoto Prize recognizes major contributions to "the scientific, cultural, and spiritual betterment of mankind." The prize is overseen by the Inamori Foundation, named for Kazuo Inamori, founder of the industrial ceramics corporation Kyocera. Kyocera's North American headquarters is in San Diego.

Every November, laureates deliver speeches at the Kyoto Prize ceremonies in Kyoto. Since 2002, they have also come to San Diego each March for the Kyoto Prize Symposium.

The current laureates are:

Hirotsugu Akaike, professor emeritus, Japan's Institute of Statistical Mathematics.

Leonard A. Herzenberg, professor of genetics at Stanford University's School of Medicine.

Issey Miyake, designer.

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