



A.

**My Father,  
George Nakashima**

*Mira Nakashima*

My father, George Nakashima, was born of Samurai lineage in Spokane, Washington, died in New Hope, Pennsylvania in 1990, and prided himself on being “the world’s first hippie,” a Hindu Catholic and Japanese Shaker Druid. Trained and employed as an architect before he turned to furniture, he was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, saying he was grateful to Wright for “showing him what not to do” with his life. Although renowned as a man of peace, he built his business as a one-man battle against modern technology, embracing the principle of hand craftsmanship assisted by power machinery, utilizing natural wood not only as his material but his inspiration.

I have come to believe that George Nakashima was an artisan in the Mingei tradition as defined by philosopher Soetsu Yanagi, founder of the Japanese Living Treasure program in the 1920’s, in which the goal of the artisan is to achieve the state of “no mind.” Following the Japanese traditions of the Zen and Tea Ceremony masters, the Nakashima aesthetic embodies the ideals of *wabi* and *sabi*, subtle definitions of light and shadow which override decoration and bright colors, while negative spaces create a strong but silent dialogue with the positive and dynamic elements. Whereas in Western tradition, the goal is innovation and an egotistic striving for the creation of “new” forms, the Eastern traditions honor, revere, and indeed appear to imitate by repeating forms until they

become second nature to the artisan. Unlike Western tradition, Eastern traditions value, as Shoji Hamada once said, “the variety of sameness” perceived not as boring repetition but a way to true understanding of the nature of form.

My father, who had attained status as an Eagle Scout, was a pioneer and trail-blazer, the first in this country to call himself a “woodworker” as a non-derogatory term. He cumulatively built his own tradition of design integrated with the wood-working process and with the nature of wood itself, with the result that most of his early designs continue to be made to this very day.

Unique in their time, the outward forms and process have inspired many to imitate and emulate his innovations. He believed that a man’s life and work should be integrated, rather than separated, and that work was not just a way to earn a living, but a way to live, a way of being, a karma yoga. At the heart of his creativity lay a very non-Western ideal of monasticism and spirituality germinated in the mountains and forests of the Olympic Peninsula, nurtured and inspired by the magnificently articulated space of the great Cathedral of Chartres, and driven home by his two years’ work at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, India. This theocentric, rather than egocentric view of the Universe meant being receptive to a higher power, which not only kept his ego in perspective, but opened up new realms of possibility in design, unbounded by previous convention. Techniques from Japanese carpentry, as well as vernacular forms from the Shaker and Windsor traditions were adapted to contemporary life and design, often in unconventional ways, such as the decoratively exposed butterfly and dove-tail joinery which have become our trademarks. The Nakashima tradition speaks of subtle proportion as well as strength, and follows directly in the path of Mies Van der Roe’s tenet “less is more.” Exposed joinery is used in a decorative manner, but only when it is structurally necessary.

Beyond this, George Nakashima encouraged the forces and forms of Nature itself to speak for themselves. He never molded them into man-made shapes, as most other furniture makers do. This did not mean, however, simply coating a naturally shaped slab of wood with varnish and setting it on legs, like the barrage of Redwood tables that were popular during the 1960’s. Nakashima’s “free-form” tables are carefully blended with artistically balanced and angled cut edges and bases designed in the same manner as architecture. In our work, great care is taken to use trees harvested in a sustainable manner, trees which have reached maturity and are no longer viable, trees that must be removed to make room for buildings. Some trees have been taken for some purpose inappropriate to their nature, such as those three magnificent 11’ long by 60” diameter Bubinga logs destined to be cut into 1”x1” pieces for knife handles that my father rescued. Much of our lumber is acquired through serendipity, such as cancelled orders of exotic lumber like Persian Walnut, or irregularly shaped burls with too many holes for veneer purposes. My father once shocked a reporter by saying that his work was really a lumber business, but it is true that we could not work the way we do without custom cutting trees normally rejected by lumber brokers.

George Nakashima, like Soetsu Yanagi, exalted the dynamic beauty of irregularity, the inclusion and acknowledgement of imperfection as a way of achieving perfection. Working with the forms of nature, rather than against them, was a symbolic representation of his belief that Man must learn to work with Nature, rather than to dominate and conquer her, as modern society seems intent to do.



B.



C.



D.

A.  
Redwood Root Burl Arlyn  
Coffee Table with walnut  
base, 1976  
photo: George Erml

C.  
Conoid Lounge Chair, 1980  
unfinished English walnut  
photo: George Erml

B.  
George Nakashima working  
on drawings in the Studio,  
c. 1983  
photo: Osamu Murai

D.  
Teak Milkhouse Table, 1944  
photo: George Erml

E.  
Walnut Odakyu cabinet with  
"Asa-no-ha" doors from  
Japan, 1976  
photo: George Erml

F.  
Walnut Conoid Bench with  
Back, designed 1962  
produced in 1974 for  
Governor Nelson  
Rockefeller's Japanese home  
in Pocantico Hills  
photo: George Erml

G.  
Claro and English Walnut  
Burl Minguren II coffee table  
designed 1974, produced  
1994

H.  
Black Walnut Armchair, 1944  
photo: George Erml

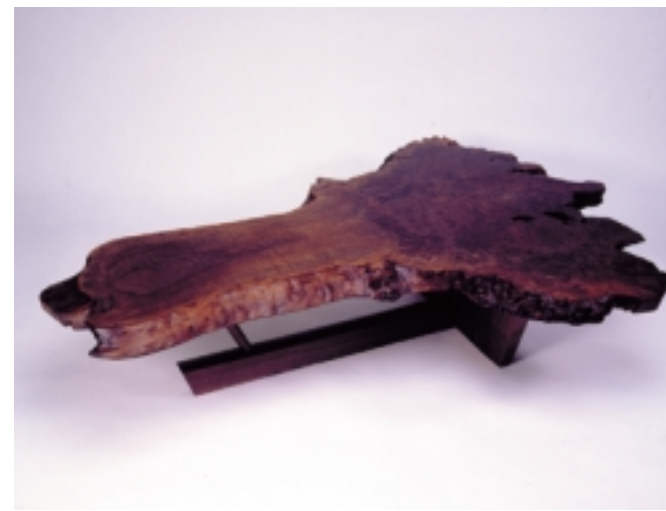
I.  
Installation of furniture for  
Ultimo in Dallas, 1997



E.



F.



G.



H.



I.

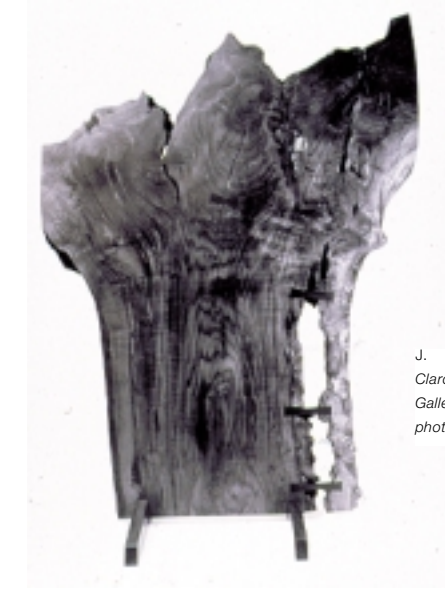
Natural wood in our home and work and environment brings us in close proximity to Nature in a very real and tangible way, sometimes the only contact many of us have on a daily basis. It can also infuse us with a sense of peace so often lacking in the modern environment if we are open and aware of its power to do so. Making Nakashima furniture is indeed a way of life, combined with the hard-nosed reality of acquiring the finest wood available, designed with integrity and imagination, and crafted by hands trained to use both power and hand tools. It is the acknowledgement that wood has a life and energy of its own, that good craftsmanship and design must by nature be totally honest, and that Man is but a blip in the overall scheme of the Universe.

When my father passed away at the age of 85 in 1990, he was surprisingly at the peak of his career. In addition to the plethora of orders generated by the American Craft Museum Retrospective show, we were in the midst of trying to replace a 35-year collection of furniture occupying the entire house of Evelyn and Arthur Krosnick, which was destroyed by fire. It was an awesome task to follow in his footsteps, let alone try to fill his shoes, but I felt that my father would have wanted the work to continue, so we kept going as best we could. In 1993, Bruce Katsiff of the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, asked me to design and build a memorial reading room for my father in the new addition to the Museum, and the world began to know that Nakashima Studios was still alive under my direction.

In 1994, Mikio Shinagawa curated and sponsored a show of new pieces at the Tenri Gallery in New York, most of which were vertically displayed table-tops, and although the furniture sold very slowly, a new line of sculptural pieces came into being. As work was rather sparse during this time, I was able to indulge clients with small projects, such as candle-holders and mobiles, and to experiment with new bases for coffee and dining tables, outdoor benches and other special seating. I had the privilege of working with the architect Michael Gabellini on two rather extensive installations of the Ultimo Boutique in San Francisco and Dallas in 1997, the studio of jewelry designer Colleen Rosenblatt in Hamburg in 1998, and the boutique of Nicole Farhi in New York in 1999. In 1998, my new Keisho line debuted alongside vintage pieces at Robert Aibel's Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia.

One of our most important clients is the architect-developer David Hovey of Illinois, who heard my father's Mies Van Der Rohe Lectures series at Illinois Institute of Technology in 1977 and has been ordering furniture ever since. He has become a connoisseur and collector of rare woods, and as his residences are of a grand scale, has by now ordered the most large pieces in the history of Nakashima.

Perhaps my father was sent to teach all of us a lesson by creating a remarkably successful business based on hand craft and solid wood in a world of mass production and veneers printed on plastic. As Soetsu Yanagi's son Sori asserts, we can no longer afford to be a disposable culture, creating ever-growing mountains of garbage, including nuclear and chemical pollutants. We must tend to the world's forests, lest our supply not only of trees and wood, but of oxygen and other elements essential to life itself, be destroyed beyond replenishment. We must cherish the treasures of wood we have in our home and office environments and nurture these treasures of the future.



J.  
Claro Walnut Tsuitate from Tenri  
Gallery show, 1994  
photo: Robert Hunsicker

The real challenge, now that there are only three men from my father's original crew remaining, is to find and train a new generation who understand and appreciate the value of working up a sweat in shops with no air conditioning, sheds with no heat, being covered in wood dust, or patiently rubbing oil into wood to bring it to life.

For me, even one client in a hundred who is happy with their furniture not just because it is functional, but because it can be regarded as art, makes it all worth while. For now, the Nakashima tradition continues...

**Mira Nakashima worked for many years with her father, George Nakashima, as a colleague and designer at Nakashima Studio in New Hope, PA. Since his death in 1990, she has been the creative director of the studio, where she continues to produce her father's classic furniture designs and to design and produce her own work as well.**

**George Nakashima and Mira Nakashima are both represented at SOFA by Moderne Gallery. Published in conjunction with the SOFA NEW YORK lecture *The Nakashima Legacy: Continuity and Change*.**