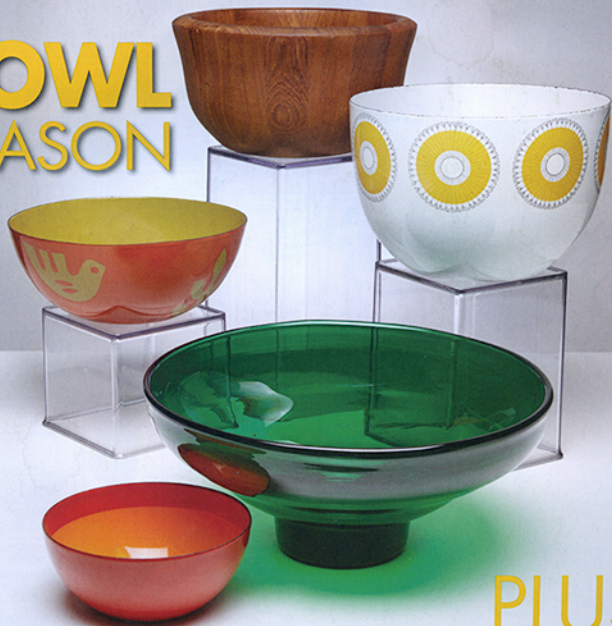


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*"I feel that there is a spirit in trees that's very deep. I am somewhat of a Druid that way...I do feel that in order to produce a fine piece of furniture, the spirit of a tree lives on. I can give it a second life, as something like the medical profession. But I think this is in a way even more realistic and deeper than what the medical profession can do because I can make an object that lives and can live forever, possibly, if used properly. So that's my objective and that's my happiness to find this relationship with a tree."*

— George Nakashima

# George Nakashima

The late furniture designer's "perfection in imperfection" philosophy made him and his works one of a kind

BY MIKE McLEOD



*"We are left in awe by the nobility of a tree, its eternal patience, its suffering caused by man and sometimes nature, its witness to thousands of years of Earth's history, its creations of fabulous beauty. It does nothing but good, with its prodigious ability to serve, it gives off its bounty of oxygen while absorbing gases harmful to other living things. ...Its fruits feed us. Its branches shade and protect us. And, finally, when time and weather bring it down, its body offers timber for our houses and boards for our furniture. The tree lives on."*

George Nakashima's respect for trees translated directly into the furniture he designed, which can be described as earthy, unexpected, creative, often symmetrical and asymmetrical in the same piece, elegant, and definitely unique. His creations, which often incorporated slabs of irregular tree trunks or roots, are highly recognizable and appreciated.

Nakashima was born in 1905 in Spokane, Washington, to Japanese immigrant parents. After earning a bachelors degree in architecture, Nakashima studied in France for a time before returning to America and earning a masters degree, also in architecture, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He then traveled internationally and was hired by an architectural firm in Tokyo. One long-term project found Nakashima overseeing the building of an ashram dormitory in India. There, he became a disciple of the ashram's leader, Sri Aurobindo, and he began to design furniture.

*Continued*

*Opposite: Circa 1980 Single-Beam "New" Rocker of American black walnut and hickory, 1980, sold for \$4,375 by Sotheby's New York in 2013. Photos courtesy of Sotheby's.*





**Left:** Circa-1973 Slab Coffee Table of American black walnut and East Indian rosewood, 13 x 81.5 x 34 inches, sold for \$32,500 by Sotheby's New York in June 2015. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.

**Right:** A 1984 Table Lamp of American black walnut, East Indian rosewood, holly, and parchment, just over 24.5 inches tall, sold for \$6,250 by Sotheby's New York in 2013. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.



"My father grew up in Seattle and was a Boy Scout," Nakashima's daughter Mira Nakashima explained to me recently. "He often went out by himself in the mountains and felt a wonderful sense of peace there. [At the ashram] he found the philosophy he was looking for in life. There are different types of yoga, besides the physical discipline, and this philosophy was the yoga of doing (Karma Yoga). It gave him the strength and courage to do what he did."

George Nakashima returned to the U.S. and married Marion Okajima. They settled in Seattle, where daughter Mira was born. In the year following Pearl Harbor, Nakashima and his family were sent to a Japanese internment camp in southern Idaho. Despite the injustice of the situation and the hardship it created for his family, Nakashima made the most of the experience. At the camp, he met and was tutored by a carpenter trained in traditional Japanese woodworking. From him, he learned woodworking skills to pay attention to detail.

Mira Nakashima, only 6 months old when her family went to the camp, has no memories of being there. "When I went back to the site of the camp," she

says, "I didn't remember it specifically, but I felt like I'd been there before." During that visit to the camp, she met a farmer who had employed her father to tend his field of carrots. The farmer related how Mira's father had told him, with tears in his eyes, how grateful he was for the job.

The farmer also said the authorities required him to drive out each day to pick up the work crew and then drive them home at day's end. After a while, the farmer gave his keys to the men and told them to drive themselves. He was tired of the back and forth. Obviously, George and the men in the crew had gained his trust.

In 1943, George and his family were released due to the efforts of his former employer, Antonin Raymond. The Nakashimas moved to New Hope, Pennsylvania, where they lived and worked on a farm that Raymond owned. From there, Nakashima began building furniture, and his design philosophy came to fruition and eventually to acclaim.

Nakashima's discipleship in the ashram and education in Camp Minidoka heightened his innate skills and aesthetic to yield a style of functional beauty. He sought purity in

design while highlighting the character of the wood, particularly its gnarled imperfections. His "yoga of doing" found the perfection in imperfection.

"When he first started out and was working with a Japanese carpenter," Mira Nakashima says, "he used found materials around the camp and bitterbrush from the desert." Later, after leaving the camp, she says, "he didn't have money for good wood but got cutoffs from the lumber industry and went from there. After Dad was able to get these cutoffs, he made friends with loggers in the area and got trees others didn't want; then he oversaw the milling to get the right direction and thickness."

As Nakashima produced more furniture its appeal grew. Mira Nakashima says it caught the attention of collectors because it was different. "My father integrated life and work by not tying into the big-corporation mindset of mass production and making money," she says. "To him, it was more important to make beautiful furniture; money would come later. He combined utilitarianism with beauty."

Nakashima died in 1990, but his work is carried on in Pennsylvania by

the George Nakashima Foundation for Peace and by the George Nakashima Woodworker furniture studio. Mira Nakashima is involved in both. "I had a tour group through this morning, and they said they felt peaceful here and felt the furniture was alive," she says.

George Nakashima's sense of beauty continues to enthrall collectors. "Dad always felt he was giving trees new life, and life continues. Not everybody understands this; it's not for everyone, but if you are sensitive to it, you will sense life in each item we make. People realize this when they have sold their Nakashimas. It's like selling a part of themselves."

His work can be found in the homes of Steven Spielberg, Brad Pitt, Julianne Moore and many others. A Nakashima Conoid Bench, Conoid Chair, Lounge Chair, and Minguren II Coffee Table are preserved for history at the Smithsonian.

In 2006, a Nakashima redwood burl and black walnut dining table sold for a stratospheric \$822,400 at Sotheby's. After the stock market crashed in 2008, prices reset, but they are again on the upswing. In 2012, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg bought a



Left: Circa-1980 Conoid Bench of American black walnut, East Indian rosewood and hickory, 32 x 84.25 x 35.5 inches, sold by Sotheby's New York for \$25,000 in June 2015. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.

Below: Tsuhito (room divider) sofa. Photo courtesy of George Nakashima Woodworker.



Above: Circa-1965 Conoid Dining Table of American black walnut and East Indian rosewood, 28.5 x 106.75 x 42.5 inches, sold for \$143,000 in 2013. Circa-1980 set of six Conoid Dining Chairs of American black walnut and hickory, 35.5 x 20 x 20.5 inches, sold for \$40,625 in 2013, Sotheby's New York. Photos courtesy of Sotheby's.

Right: Conoid cross-legged end table. Photo courtesy of George Nakashima Woodworker.



14-foot Nakashima dining table for \$130,500 at a Phillips, de Pury & Luxembourg auction.

Mira Nakashima has written a book about her father called *Nature, Form and Spirit: The Life and Legacy of George Nakashima*. Of her father's influence, she says, "Today, there is a strong legacy that lives all over the world in using the natural form of wood. The architecture he created on the property here [his workshop, studio, and home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania] now is a Historic National Landmark. Another landmark in his life was to leave the camp in the desert and start a legacy here in New Hope."

Coming from a generation embroiled in war, George Nakashima desired peace for the world. "My father had

a dream to make Peace Altars (large meeting tables) for the world," she says. "If people could meet around them, we could get a little closer to world peace. ...Sitting or standing around one has a unifying effect."

He planned to build seven Altars of Peace, one for each of the seven continents. To date, Altars of Peace have been built and installed in New York City, Moscow, and Auroville (in Pondicherry, India). A fourth is planned for Cape Town, South Africa. The New York Altar of Peace is made from two matching walnut planks. It measures 10½ x 10½ feet and weighs more than 1,000 pounds.

Though Nakashima has been gone for a quarter-century, his legacy of beauty and hope for peace live on. 