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## *Focus on Brazil*

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# INTO THE WOODS

*George Nakashima's life in furniture*

The American designer/craftsman with a Japanese name made his mark in the studio-furniture movement of the previous century through an uncannily Japanese approach to his work. With a diverse range of life experience involving exposure to various cultures and sensibilities, George Nakashima developed his own very particular meaning and method of design. A sense of spirituality penetrated his work, which served to emphasise the high quality and clever detailing of the workmanship. Each item was handmade and thus embodied the nature of the man himself. DAMN<sup>®</sup> visited his estate in Pennsylvania to take in the ambience.

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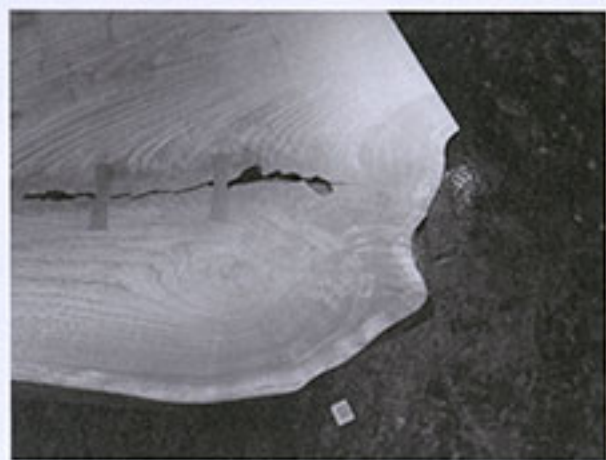


George Nakashima's son Kevin, sitting inside the airy interior of the Conold Studio



Versatile architect, designer, and craftsman, George Nakashima interconnected the mastery of carpentry with a sculptural sensibility and personal spirituality in his exceptional design work. For more than half-a-century, he created unique furniture that fully respected the natural qualities of wood and its use in production, from the workshop at his large estate in New Hope, Pennsylvania. To this day, his remarkable legacy of fine artistic furniture has been retained by his descendants, with the George Nakashima trademark having become one of the most revered in the history of modern American decorative arts.

Nearly all of the Nakashima family members welcomed DAMN<sup>®</sup> on our arrival in New Hope. His work from the second half of the 20th century continues primarily through the efforts of his daughter, Mira Nakashima, author of his comprehensive monograph and creative director of the company, which still produces the iconic shapes of Nakashima's furniture – tailored to the needs of specific customers. We were also fortunate enough to meet with Nakashima's son Kevin, his grandson Ru Amagasa and wife Soomi, who now take care of the furniture design and production, as well as its presentation, distribution, and promotion all around the world. The harmonic New Hope valley, newly covered by a fresh layer of snow, still radiates the strong creative spirit of George Nakashima, whose tables, chairs, lamps, and accessories are the best



Cantilevered staircase in the Minguren Museum / Arts Building built by Nakashima in 1967

Detail of the butterfly joints used to fasten the table top

Storage of wooden planks under the Conoid studio



examples of the American studio furniture movement of the last century.

The phenomenon of studio furniture in the United States first began to emerge during the 1930s, with the pioneering work of Wharton Esherick, whose house, also recently opened to the public, is situated in Pennsylvania too. Due to their sculptural work, the skilled craftsmen of that era became peculiar artists whose pieces represent an original conception of applied art, as they completely rejected the modernist idea of serial industrial production. Studio furniture experienced its golden age from the 1950s to the 1970s, designed by the likes of J.B. Blunk, Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle, Michael Coffey, and last but not least, George Nakashima, whose background was a bit different than that of his American contemporaries.

#### WORLDLY SPIRIT

George Nakashima was born in 1905 in Spokane, Washington, and at a young age decided on a career as an architect. He studied at the University of Washington, and in 1931 received a Master's de-



The Arts Building, designed by Nakashima in 1967, incorporates an abstract mosaic by painter Ben Shahn.

One of the workshop buildings, with a hanging Conoid chair



Interior of the Arts Building, with its striking parabolic ceiling and original Nakashima furniture pieces

gree at M.I.T. Prior to travelling to Japan, he visited France and North Africa. In Tokyo, he soon joined the studio of the famous architect Antonin Raymond. Raymond, a Czech from Kladno, became one of the pioneers of modernist architecture in Japan during the 1930s, and was an endless source of inspiration and knowledge to Nakashima. Once there, Nakashima began to focus on designing furniture. In the mid-1930s he designed some rustic-looking pieces for Raymond's wooden church in Karuizawa, and a few years later (1938), became chief architect of Raymond's pioneering project in India. Golconda, in Pondicherry, was the first building in the country to have a reinforced concrete skeleton, and in many ways, it became a model for post-war tropical modernism. As a result of his stay in India, Nakashima began to absorb very different approaches to life and spirituality. He spoke of himself as a world citizen. He believed in Buddhism, Hinduism, and ancient Japanese philosophies, and in the U.S.A. he became a Roman Catholic. Afterwards, he managed very well to incorporate into his work his ultra-sensitive approach to the world. In 1939, Nakashima returned to Tokyo and worked with a former colleague from the Antonin Raymond studio, Kunio Maekawa. There he also met his future wife, a Japanese American named Marion Okajima; they married in 1941 in Los Angeles. Having returned to the United States, he was placed in the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho during the war years, where he actually had

the opportunity to work in the carpentry workshop. Then, when the war ended, thanks to the request for his release by his former boss, Antonin Raymond, who had since settled in New Hope, Nakashima was allowed to leave the camp and work on Raymond's farm. In 1946, he bought a large plot of land in New Hope and built his dream house.

#### KNOTS AND BUTTERFLIES

After the completion of the workshop, he started work on the family home. Because Nakashima's work received more and more attention during the 1950s, several other buildings, including a showroom, a studio, and an Arts building, were erected. During that period, New Hope turned into a lively artistic community. Just a few metres away from Nakashima's place, Phillip Lloyd Powell and Paul Evans, other leaders in post-war studio furniture, had also established themselves. From that point onwards, Nakashima dedicated his entire life to the design and manufacture of limited edition, custom-made furniture, created as individual elements. His



trademark became the use of solid wood planks that, despite the perfect detailing and precise manufacturing, were left in their natural form, complete with irregular edges and knots. His monumentally proportioned tables were often made of two or more uneven wooden boards. As a characteristic feature, Nakashima used so-called butterfly joints, wedges that hold the huge blocks of wood together. A Japanese lightness and spirituality was united with the raw qualities and huge dimensions of the wood. In 1957, he completed the construction of his studio building, with its semi-circular roof. To furnish the interior, he designed the Conoid series of furniture elements, which included the famous cantilevered chair that later became one of his most successful and best selling pieces. Apart from very few collaborative projects, Nakashima never designed pieces



Rear section of the Conoid Studio, with its distinctive conoidal shell roof in reinforced concrete, designed by Nakashima in 1957 (1)

Metal sculpture outside the Conoid Studio, by Harry Bertola (2)

Interior of the workshop adjacent to the Conoid Studio (3)



for serial production. One of the exceptions was a successful collection for the American furniture-maker Knoll, which debuted in 1945. Straight Chair and Splay Leg Table were, among other pieces, the symbiosis of precise Japanese joinery, extraordinary quality, and everyday simplicity. (These pieces were reintroduced by Knoll in 2008).

#### GIVING PEACE A CHANCE

In 1967, Nakashima completed one of the last buildings on his extensive property, the Minguren Museum / Arts Building, the culmination of his ambitions as an architect. A parabolic roof covering an airy interior space with a raised terrace, it was mainly used as a meeting place for friends and for special occasions. The exterior is decorated with an abstract mosaic painting by Ben Shahn, a neighbour, close friend, and collaborator. During the 1970s and 80s, Nakashima dedicated himself to large private commissions, including furnishing the Rockefeller's Japanese House in Pocantico Hills built by Junzo Yoshimura in 1974, and his very own project called Altars of Peace. During the 1980s, he decided to produce a series of six extremely large tables, six magnificent altars of peace – one for each continent – as centres for meditation, prayer, and activities. Only three of them have thus far been installed: in New York, Russia, and India. However, the Nakashima Foundation for Peace is continuing with the plan to realise all six tables, with the next one destined for South Africa.

George Nakashima's property is listed in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, and still plays a key role in the production of the furniture. His descendants are happy to show visitors around the premises each Saturday, whence you can readily find yourself becoming devoted to this extraordinary artisan, whose work is difficult to classify and describe, but easy to feel.

Two of the very few serial pieces by Nakashima: Splay Leg Table and Straight Chair, first produced by Knoll in 1945 (1/2)

Still life in the Arts Building, with Nakashima's architectural drawings and one of Harry Bertola's Sound sculptures

One of the workshops on the Nakashima estate



[nakashimawoodworker.com](http://nakashimawoodworker.com)  
[nakashimafoundation.org](http://nakashimafoundation.org)