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George Nakashima

1905-1990

By Daniel Cash

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Introduction

As part of the Principles of Furniture and Joinery Design module, a research report was to be carried out based on a furniture designer and maker. The following report outlines a brief history of the craftsman which will include what influenced him, his timber preferences, the style in which he used and will show examples, sketches and give locations of work attributed to him. As a conclusion to the report, I will give my opinion on what I liked or disliked about his work, how his work would influence my own and whether I would consider ever reproducing any of his work. The designer that the report is based on is George Nakashima.

History

Life story

George Nakashima was an American-Japanese designer and furniture maker born in Washington 1905. According to The Smithsonian American Art Museum (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2021), which has held exhibitions in which Nakashima's work has featured, after initially beginning to study forestry, he decided that the industry was slowing down, and he made a move to architecture. While studying architecture at the University of Washington, modernism in the architectural industry was in full swing. Frank Lloyd Wright had already established himself in America, while Le Corbusier was beginning to establish himself in France. Nakashima showed promising potential as an architect during his first years studying and so, was awarded a scholarship to study at École des Beaux-Arts at Fontainebleau, where he earned a diploma. Upon returning to America, he finished his studies at the University of Washington and then went on to complete a Masters of Architecture in Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Not content with settling down and beginning a life as an architect in America, Nakashima sold all his belongings and purchased a round-the-world steamship ticket and began his travels. This journey brought him all over the world and included stops in France, Japan, India and back to America. Whilst living in France, he admired the Gothic churches and marvelled at their geometric beauty and grandeur. His daughter, Mira Nakashima, wrote a

book titled: *Nature, Form & Spirit: The life and Legacy of George Nakashima* (Nakashima M. , 2003) and in the book she writes about what impressed him most about his time in France and it was the idea that a community would get together, so many years previous, could construct such a building. He would also spend time admiring the modernist buildings like the swiss pavilion designed by Le Corbusier. And although he admired the modernist buildings, he found himself beginning to dislike European modernism. At this point, he decided that it was time to move to Japan and experience the life of his Ancestors.

In Nakashima's book titled *The Soul of a Tree: A woodworker's Reflections* (Nakashima, 1981), he writes about how in Japan he had to learn and then live in traditional Japanese ways, living life in a much more modest way. It was here in Japan that he began to practice zen Buddhism and Shinto beliefs. Both of which would eventually impact both how he designed furniture and lived his life. Shortly after arriving in Japan, he began working for Antonin Raymond, who had previously worked for Frank Lloyd Wright. While working for Raymond, he began to appreciate the traditional Japanese structures and in particular Japanese joinery and carpenters. It was here also where he became aware of the importance of the traditional craftsman in the creation of an environment between structures and their surroundings.

According to *Metropolis* (Sharma, 2021), an architecture and design-focused magazine, when Raymond's firm was commissioned to design and build the Golconde Dormitory in India, Nakashima was tasked with overseeing the construction. While working here, he became a disciple of guru Sri Aurobindo. This is when Nakashima began practicing spirituality and was even given the name Sundarananda which means "one who delights with beauty".

In the *Densho Encyclopaedia* (Densho Encyclopedia contributors, 2021), it is said that shortly after returning to America in the early 1940's, a period of internment was enforced by the government which saw all Japanese descendants in the country placed in detainment camps. Although this was a tough time for his family and friends, Nakashima benefited from it. Whilst detained, he became good friends with a "Daiku", which is a Japanese master carpenter. They both learned from each other, Nakashima teaching him how to design furniture and the Daiku teaching Nakashima how to build it. He did not realise it now, but this would be the start of his new career.

Evolution of works

Shortly after Antonin Raymond secures their release from detainment in 1943, Nakashima decides to leave architecture and set up a workshop to design and make furniture. It didn't take long for him to establish himself and in 1946 he begins to design a furniture line for Knoll Associates.



Figure 1. Splay-leg table for Knoll Associates. Image courtesy of NakashimaWoodworkers.com

Mira Nakashima writes in her book

(Nakashima M. , 2003), about his furniture line with Knoll and his Knoll Model N19 chair, designed by Nakashima, which is made from birch and closely resembles his "Straight chair" shown below in Figure 2. Also, for Knoll, he designed the "Splay-leg Table" which is shown in Figure 1.

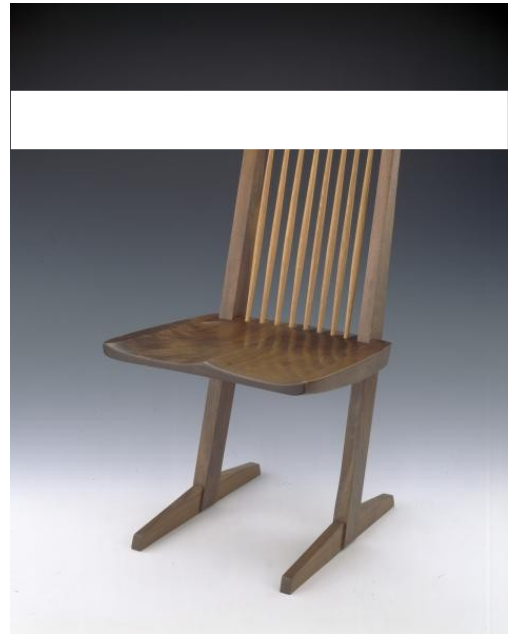
It wasn't long after this that Nakashima established himself as a furniture designer and maker. One of the first chairs that Nakashima designed was the chair simply called "The Straight Chair". A picture of this is shown here in figure 2. The straight chair is a modern style Windsor chair with turned legs and spindles for the back. Typical of Nakashima's designs, the primary wood used is walnut, but a contrasting colour was used for the spindles.



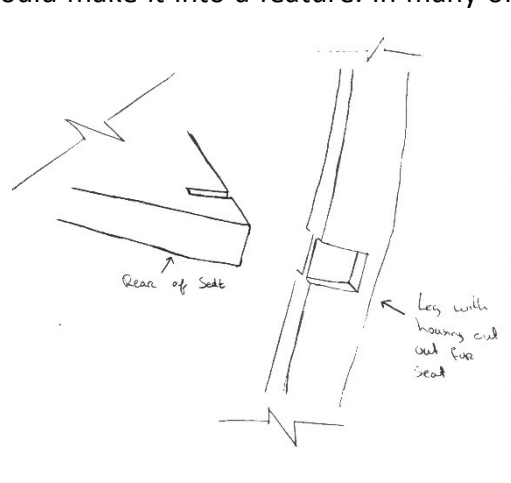
Figure 2. Nakashima straight chair. Image courtesy of Knoll Associates.

Nakashima went on to design a wide range of different chairs, and became iconic of Nakashima's designs, is the

“Conoid Chair”. The Conoid chair is part of the conoid furniture line. The chair features two sled style feet with legs that extend upright to the crest of the chair which houses the hand shaped spindles. The primary feature of this chair however is the cantilevered seat. The seat is joined at the back to the two upright legs using a simple bridle joint, a sketch of this joint is also shown in sketch 1. Shown here in figure 3 is a Conoid chair made in 1971, which can be seen today on display in the Renwick Gallery in Washington D.C.



The Conoid range however was also the first time Nakashima used full sections of trees that were cut through and through from a tree. Where most people would see imperfections in wood and either not use it or mask it, Nakashima would make it into a feature. In many of his pieces the contrast between sap and heart wood is evident and this was always intentional. Nakashima would make use of the natural shape of a slabs edge and even the crotch between trunks or branches. Shown below is a Conoid bench with its natural edges. On the left you can see the crotch between trunk and branch. On the right you can see a fissure in the wood.



Sketch 1 joint detail between Conoid seat and leg. Sketch by Author.

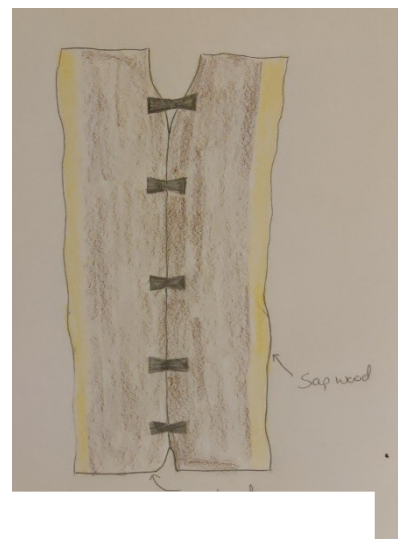
One feature that Nakashima used a lot in his work was the use of a so called “butterfly joint”. Where two pieces of timber would normally be joined and made to seem as one, Nakashima would inlay butterfly, or bowtie, shaped



Figure 4. Conoid Bench. Image courtesy of Freemans Auctions.

pieces of wood and highlight the joining point of the two pieces. In sketch 2, a drawing of butterfly joints joining two book matched slabs is shown.

From the 1970's onwards is considered when Nakashima produced his best work. More clients were coming forward and different types of European woods were beginning to become more readily available. From this point, most of his pieces had natural edges, defects on show and geometric bases.



Sketch 2. Typical example of how book matched slabs would be joined. Sketch by Author.

In the 1980's, Nakashima knew his career would soon be coming to an end. In 1981, he published his book "*The Soul of a Tree*" in which he outlines his career, his philosophy's, and his artistry. As a final



project, he purchased a large American walnut tree and he envisioned making four huge tables that he would make and gift to places of worship. These tables would be known as Altars for Peace. To make these huge tables, he would cut the tree through and through and then book match two pieces and join them with butterfly joints. In 1986 he made and delivered the first of these tables to St. John the Devine's church in New York City. The table itself measures 12-foot-long and 12 foot wide. Shown in figure 5 is George Nakashima with the table during its manufacture.

Figure 5. George Nakashima and his Altar for Peace. Image courtesy of The Nakashima Foundation.

Unfortunately, this was the only one of the Altars of Peace tables that Nakashima would see delivered as he died in 1990. However, after his death his family continued working on the altars and gifting them. To this day, you can still see these tables on display in The Russian Academy of Art in Moscow, St. John the Devine's church in New York and in the Unity Pavilion in



Figure 6. Nakashima's home presently, Conoid chairs on display. Image courtesy of Knoll.com

Auroville, India. In April 2014, George Nakashima's house, studio and workshop were designated a National Historic Landmark. Visitors can go and see his house, which he built in 1956, which is full of furniture that he designed and made in his workshop. His daughter Mira still manages the running of the Nakashima studio production of its furniture.

Styles and influences

It's clear to see that Nakashima's studies and work as an architect influenced his designs as a furniture maker. Modernist architecture was the idea that the function of an item is more important than the form and embraced the idea of minimalism. The Conoid chair and the Straight Chair are an example of this in that their function as a chair is a priority over the aesthetics. The Straight Chair is a modern version of a traditional Windsor chair but with simple turnings and a curved back that does not continue out to form arms. The Conoid chair is minimalist in design with just two legs that extend to form the back of the chair and no stretchers between them.

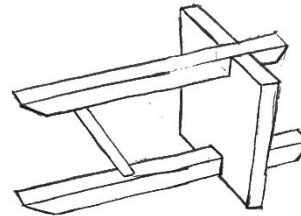
When talking about Nakashima's style, it's hard to pinpoint just one but it's a blend of different styles. His designs can be seen as modernist but are also like those made in a shaker style. Shaker style designs are simple designs that value function and simplicity over excessive decoration and ornamentation. This can be seen when we look at most of the hand turned spindles that Nakashima used which were simply tapered.

Nakashima's time in Japan greatly influenced his style as a furniture maker. Not only did he grow to appreciate traditional Japanese carpentry but whilst he was living in Japan he would have become familiar with the philosophy of "Mingei", an art movement which focused on the beauty of natural materials and hand-made production. A belief of the Mingei movement was that crafts should be made anonymous, and this may be why Nakashima didn't sign his name on his pieces until later in his career.

There is a clear relationship between the Shaker principles, the Mingei movement and Nakashima's work in that all three based their designs around the natural beauty of the material as well as the simplicity of their design.

Opinion

After completing the research on George Nakashima, I would say there is far more that I like about his work rather than dislike. One of the main reasons that I like his designs are the simplicity of them. His minimalist designs allow the natural grain and shape of the tree provide the visual impact of the piece. Whilst the bases or support structures aren't the eye catching features of his work, they are often indicative of a Nakashima design. Shown in sketch 3 is an example of the base of a "Minguren" coffee table. Like many of Nakashima's designs, the base is thick, asymmetrical and I like the cantilevered look it gives to the finished piece.

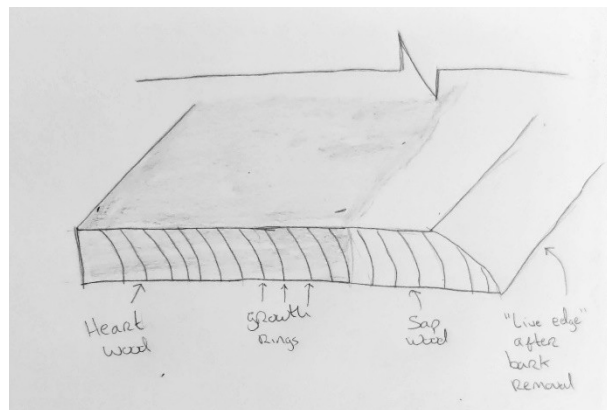


Typical
Minguren
Table base

Sketch 3 Minguren table base. Sketch by Author

In his designs, I like the use of different species of timber to give a contrasting colour. He would often use American walnut as a primary material choice but would then use hickory for spindles in his chairs. In his later work he would regularly use a contrasting material when making bowtie inlays in his pieces. I like that it would highlight the fact he was making use of a timbers defects or joining two pieces.

I admire the fact that throughout his career, there was very little waste involved in his work in comparison to traditional furniture. Where most people would hide defects or remove sap wood from certain timbers, Nakashima made a point of using them as features as he believed they showed the natural beauty of a timber. The concept of his slab tables means that the only waste

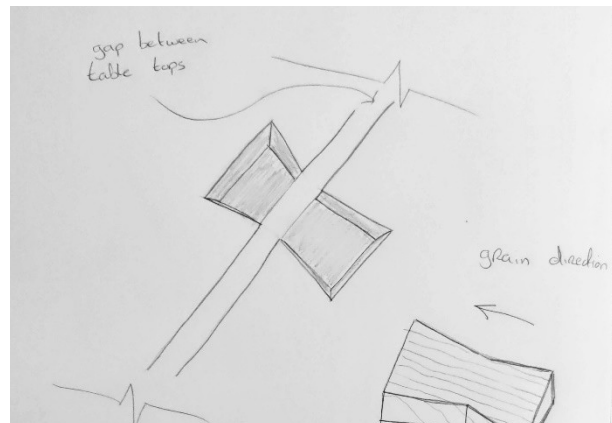


Sketch 4 Section through slab after bark removal. Sketch by Author.

really involved was the initial removal of the bark. Shown in sketch 4 is a section through a slab that has had the bark removed to use as a live edge slab. Note in the sketch the colour difference to indicate the colour difference between the heart and sap wood and also the growth rings of the tree.

Summary

Going into my final year, if the designers work were to influence what I would do as a capstone project, I think rather than replicating one of his designs, I would use certain aspects as influences. The use of live edge slabs and bowtie inlays is a lot more popular these days and this is something I will experiment with in the future. Although not credited with it, I think Nakashima has



Sketch 5. Housing for bowtie inlay beside a bowtie inlay with perpendicular grain direction. Sketch by Author.

influenced many designs which make the use of bowtie inlays and live edge slabs, but the use of social media platforms contributed to the popularity of the techniques. Shown in sketch 5 is the joint between two tabletops. The housing is made in the tabletops and an inlay with a matching shape is inserted. Note the grain direction of the inlay is perpendicular to the grain direction of the table. This is done to keep the pieces held firmly together and minimizes short grain in the inlay as it would fail in tension.

Nakashima tended to use species of timber that were easily obtained as they were local, so if I were to be influenced by his designs, rather than using the same species of timber as Nakashima, I would adopt the concept of using a timber that I could source locally. Where he would use a dark American walnut, cherry, or hickory, I could use a European walnut, ash, or oak. I think a slab of spalted beech would make for a very nice live edge coffee table.

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Image citations

Fig. 1 - <https://nakashimawoodworkers.com/philosophy/history-team/>

Fig. 2 - <https://www.knoll.com/product/straight-chair>

Fig. 3 - <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/conoid-chair-32469>

Fig. 4 - <https://www.freemansauction.com/news/george-nakashima-depth-anatomy-conoid-line>

Fig. 5 - <https://nakashimafoundation.org/project/north-america-usa-altar-for-peace/>

Fig. 6 - <https://www.knoll.com/knollnewsdetail/george-nakashima-studio>