





LEFT WILLIAM A. SMITH, RIGHT GEORGE EIRL, BOTH NAKASHIMA WOODWORKER STUDIO ARCHIVES



handmade modern

GEORGE NAKASHIMA, SEEKING THE SOUL OF NATURE BY JOE FLANAGAN

It is all precision and polish, evoking Eastern simplicity, Shaker asceticism, and an elegance at once timeless and of its time. It frequently calls to mind something out of Tolkein. It is furniture as high art, whose stylistic eloquence far exceeds its function, giving voice to the exuberant creativity of its maker. The work of George Nakashima has been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. His furniture is highly prized, valuable not only for its inherent merits but for its association with the artist himself. For these reasons, and more, Nakashima's house, studio, and workshop, located in rural New Hope, Pennsylvania, were recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The buildings themselves are notable as rare and idiosyncratic local examples of the International Style, while the small complex is famous as the center of Nakashima's remarkable life.

Above: Coffee table made of English oak burl, 1965. Left: Interior of Nakashima's Conoid Studio, New Hope, Pennsylvania.

TUCKED AWAY OFF A WINDING ROAD, THE PLACE IS SURPRISINGLY MODEST, THOUGH A LOOK AROUND SOON REVEALS the boundless energy and vision of a man in headlong pursuit of his passion. The buildings—designed and built by Nakashima himself—include a showroom, a guesthouse, workshops, and a vast warehouse of exotic wood. Primarily situated on a south-facing rise above a broad grassy swale, they reveal what Michael Gotkin, author of *Artists' Handmade Houses*, describes as “the unlikely marriage between American vernacular influences and Japanese sensibilities, along with a willingness to embrace the engineered forms of the modern age.” Nakashima’s ability to blend these influences account for his work’s beauty and expressiveness, and this can be said of both his buildings and furniture. Spare and simple, built with modest materials, his creations reflect a fascination with engineering and a love of simple craftsmanship.

Though Nakashima died in 1990, the whine of a table saw evokes a legacy that is very much alive. As in his time, the place functions as a boutique woodworking shop, today operated by daughter Mira, an architect who worked alongside her father since she was a child. While the complex is surrounded by the Pennsylvania countryside, there is a prominent Japanese flavor in the shallow pitched roofs, exposed rafter tails, and minimalist exterior details. The traditional elements contrast strikingly with the geometric starkness and abundance of glass that mark the modern influence. This can be seen most dramatically in the arched and cantilevered features of the Conoid Studio (1958) and the sweep of the plywood barrel-vault roof over the pool house (1960). The Arts Building—constructed to display the work of Nakashima’s friend, artist and social activist Ben Shahn—is a singular modern presence among the trees with its sharply sloped, saddle-shaped roof, designed as a hyperbolic paraboloid.

By the end of his life, Nakashima was considered one of the great furniture designers of the 20th century. When New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller was furnishing his house overlooking the Hudson, he sent his helicopter to New Hope to collect Nakashima. The designer’s list of awards is long and his influence profound, which is why the modest setting is a bit of a surprise. But understatement was a key part of Nakashima’s work. Mira and staff reproduce designs conceived by her father, with some variations. What you get with a Nakashima piece is not just artistry and workmanship. You get a piece of the Nakashima story, which is extraordinary in itself.

BORN IN SPOKANE IN 1905, NAKASHIMA STUDIED ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON. HE SPENT A year in France at the Ecole Americaine des Beaux Arts in Fontainebleau, where he won an award for his lithographs, watercolors, and etchings. Some of these early indicators of his creative versatility are on display at New Hope. The architect-turned-woodworker had a startling facility for drawing, which, obviously, was appreciated by his French instructors.

He was awarded a scholarship to Harvard’s Graduate School of Design in 1929. He was dismayed to learn that the program was based on the ideas of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus School, too steeped in theory for his taste. He was more interested in technical and practical



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Above: Walnut bench, 1974. Right: Nakashima’s signature butterfly joints in a table made of English walnut.





24"

ENGLISH WAL

CLARO WAL

KENYAKI

45

MAPLEBARK

REDWOOD

concerns. So after two weeks at Harvard, he approached the faculty at MIT about a scholarship. Thanks to a confluence of luck and talent, he was awarded one. Nakashima graduated the following year with a master's in architecture, then made a turn that characterized his searching nature. He took a job painting murals for the New York State capitol building, and then for the Long Island State Park Commission. Unemployed as the Depression set in, he headed across the Atlantic on a steamship to Paris. Near his apartment in Montparnasse, the Pavillion Suisse, an early masterwork by Le Corbusier, was going up. Watching the process was formative. He was intrigued by Le Corbusier's use of concrete, by the forms he devised and how they were reinforced. In the hands of Le Corbusier, concrete was a malleable material, and Nakashima took note.

The year 1936 found him in Japan, working at the Tokyo architectural firm of Antonin Raymond, a modernist and disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright. Nakashima immersed himself in traditional Japanese architecture and culture, embracing the Mingei Movement, an attempt to re-infuse Japanese identity into design and the arts, influenced by the principles of Buddhism. The lessons he learned were evident throughout his life. His refusal to sign his work, for example, may have sprung from a pursuit of humility. The experience profoundly influenced his view of the creative process, and his concept of beauty.

From a Zen perspective, the act of making art is mystical. Mira, in her book *Nature, Form, and Spirit*, writes, "He [believed] that it is not through conscious effort or willful artistry but through non-conceptualization, or *mushin*, that true beauty is achieved." He learned to dismiss the idea of "perfection" in favor of a beauty that would flow naturally from the hands of the maker. In an era that was seeing the handmade replaced with the manufactured, Nakashima intentionally went contrary to form. "Much of what he did was a protest against the dehumanizing effects of mass production," his daughter writes.

Antonin Raymond's work in Japan, a fusion of Modernism and traditional Japanese architecture, likewise left its mark on the young Nakashima. "Raymond was one of the groundbreakers of western architecture in Japan,"

says Mira. In the 1930s, wood was the primary construction material; "master carpenters called the shots," she says. But with the introduction of concrete, architects became a necessity.

IN 1937, RAYMOND'S FIRM WAS COMMISSIONED TO ERECT A DORMITORY FOR THE SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM, INDIA'S FIRST reinforced concrete building. Nakashima was sent to oversee the project. Already much attuned to Buddhist spiritualism, he was a sympathetic participant when he arrived at the ashram in Pondicherry. The following two years were life-changing. Nakashima managed the project in a sweltering climate where nothing of the kind had been tried before; materials had to be shipped from Japan. He became a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and remained so until the end of his life, donating his salary to the ashram over the course of the construction. The grueling task became an exercise in spiritual development. Ever watchful against the encroachment of ego, he viewed his work as prayer and devotion. His design of the building—including a cast concrete barrel vault roof to aid ventilation and insulation—he saw not as a monument to personal talent but as a collaboration with a higher power, an enabling of a transcendent good.

Above: Exterior of the Conoid Studio. Left: Eastern and local Pennsylvania elements in Nakashima's studio.

LEFT ANITA CALERO, ABOVE G. WILLIAM HOLLAND, BOTH NAKASHIMA WOODWORKER STUDIO ARCHIVES



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Woodland fantasy and modern expression inhabit the same piece.

NAKASHIMA RETURNED TO TOKYO IN 1939, WHERE HE MET THE WOMAN WHO WOULD soon be his wife, Japanese American Marion Okajima. The international situation was unstable. Antonin Raymond closed his offices and left Japan. Nakashima and his wife returned to the United States, settling in Seattle. He worked for an architectural firm as he indulged a growing passion for working wood. In exchange for teaching carpentry, a priest let him use the basement of the Maryknoll Boys' Club as a shop.

In 1942, the Nakashimas and their extended family—including his mother and father—were interned along with thousands of other Japanese Americans. At a relocation camp in Minidoka, Idaho, he met Gentaro Hikogawa, a seasoned carpenter who taught him the virtues of traditional Japanese hand tools and joinery.

In 1943, Antonin Raymond successfully petitioned for his release. The architect had secured some government contracts, but Nakashima was not allowed to contribute. Raymond put him to work on his farm in New Hope. In this contemplative setting, Nakashima digested the injustice to his family while giving himself over to his passion for woodworking. He set up shop in Raymond's milk house, designing a stool and table that are still staples in the Nakashima line. He struck a deal with a Quaker farmer for three acres of land in exchange for carpentry work. He and his family lived in a tent on the site as he began erecting a workshop.

Once that was finished, he built a house, its traditional elements mingling with the modern in the tendency to blur the line between outdoors and in. Native materials such as fieldstone became signature elements in his architecture. As his furniture business grew, Nakashima acquired more property, and the Japanese-modern hybrid style was repeated with variations in future buildings. In 1954, he built a showroom and office, which won an award from the American Institute of Architects. Other structures followed: the Finishing Department in 1955, the Chair Department in '56, the Conoid Studio in '58, the Arts Building in '67. The Japanese elements, the simple and the rustic, merged with the sleek and the daring of modernism to create an atmosphere that is almost playful. In places there is the feeling of folk art. Firmly ensconced in Bucks County, where Americana dominates, the uniqueness is clear.

Above: Nakashima's Plank Coffee Table, 1947. Right: Living room of his house.

ABOVE: GEORGE ERMIL/NAKASHIMA WOODWORKER STUDIO ARCHIVES, RIGHT ALSO THE ARCHIVES





NAKASHIMA'S FIRST FURNITURE DESIGNS WERE CLEARLY SHAKER-INFLUENCED. THERE was not just a stylistic similarity, but a philosophical one as well. The simple functionality and lack of ornament. The virtue of honest craftsmanship. The work also evoked Buddhist, Hindu, and ancient Japanese antecedents. Butterfly joints, while not uncommon in woodworking, became a signature element. Nakashima made them oversized, and frequently of a darker, more exotic wood than the rest of the piece.

He took to incorporating wood's idiosyncrasies. Burls, knots, and holes became part of a piece's identity. He didn't want to dominate the wood, but to let it live on in a new form. His slab tables were the most dramatic example—thick and broad, made of entire trees sliced lengthwise, connected by butterfly joints. The outer edges retained their natural form.

Shortly after the war, Knoll Associates, the New York City furniture manufacturer, proposed that he design for mass production. After much hesitation, he agreed, but retained the rights to make the same pieces by traditional methods. Knoll already had arrangements with designers such as Isamu Noguchi, Eero Saarinen, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The work heightened his exposure, as did his inclusion in a 1951 exhibit at the New York Museum of Modern Art. Frenchman's Cove, a Jamaica resort, commissioned him to build all its furniture.

The New Hope complex continued to grow. Ideas that didn't have an outlet in furniture found expression in building projects. He experimented with concrete in the repeating waves of the roof for the Conoid Studio. Concepts often migrated from one medium to another. His "Conoid Series" furniture line featured "daring architectural elements such as a cantilevered seat, angled back support, and thin floor runners," in the words of the National Register nomination.

Many of Nakashima's contemporaries used modern materials for their very modern designs. It was a time of stark geometry, of squares, triangles, and rectangles repeated in city blocks and sophisticated living rooms. Saarinen's plastic furniture favored curves and circles suggestive of space travel. The fact that Nakashima worked in wood—that he embraced the organic character of his medium—made him stand out. Woodland fantasy and modern expression inhabit the same piece. "He believed in low-tech," says Mira. "He believed in hands-on." In the 1960s and '70s—an era of "back-to-the-land rhetoric and practice"—Nakashima became a seminal figure in a growing studio furniture movement, writes Thomas Denenberg, chief curator of Maine's Portland Museum of Art. "His ability to articulate a sophisticated, environmentally sensitive philosophy of design based on Eastern influences struck a resonant chord."

In the 1970s, working with his dear friend, architect Junzo Yoshimura, Nakashima produced what Mira describes as "a distillation of classical Japanese aesthetics" in the house for Governor Rockefeller. Nakashima designed a series of one-of-a-kind pieces—not intended for reproduction—at the time the largest collection of his work in the United States.

NAKASHIMA HAD ARRIVED, JOINING ELITE DESIGNERS WHOSE PIECES COULD FETCH tens of thousands of dollars. He grudgingly agreed to start signing his work. Clients wanted the name, to show they owned a real Nakashima. None of this changed his modesty. His introspective nature remained a feature not only of his personal makeup but of his work. There is something peaceful in his smooth, simple shapes, and even when they display bursts of style, if there is any extravagance, it is all nature's. He remained committed to his craft, undistracted by success.

He built a house for Mira within view of the complex. "At night, I'd look across the road and see the lights on in the lumber shed," she says. "He was playing with the lumber. For relaxation and entertainment he'd go out and clear the woods behind my house."

Now a convert to Catholicism, Nakashima was commissioned to design or furnish a number of sacred spaces: St. Martin's Catholic Church in New Hope; a chapel for the Sisters of Charity in Greensburg, Pennsylvania; the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico; one in Mexico and two in Japan. His work—much to his pleasure, it seemed—was immersed in the spiritual. In the mid-1980s, he got an idea to build a series of altars. He envisioned each to be installed in a non-denominational place of worship on one of the world's continents. It was his way of encouraging inter-faith communion. As Nakashima described it, "peace in a tangible form instead of an abstract idea . . . a shrine for all peoples and owned by no one." He called them "Peace Altars." The first—roughly ten by ten feet, made of two sections of a walnut tree connected by butterfly joints—was put in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Benefactor Steven C. Rockefeller and the ecumenical Dean James Parks Morton sponsored the work.

Nakashima died in 1990. The Peace Altars were a fitting final project for a man his daughter describes as "a citizen of the world, a Hindu-Catholic-Shaker-Japanese American." Mira and her brother Kevin continue the effort under the Nakashima Foundation for Peace. One altar has been placed in the Russian Academy of Art in Moscow. Another is planned for the Desmond Tutu Peace Centre in Cape Town, South Africa.

In the meantime, activity at the workshop goes on, and the pieces are as singular today as when they were designed. In them one sees the happy randomness of nature and the precise skill of the technician. One can sense the artist's love of simplicity and his tendency to push the edge of things—not only in his work but in his inner experience. Nakashima's fullness of spirit is very much alive here, as is his legacy, which is why the complex at New Hope is now honored among the nation's great places.



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contact points web National Register of Historic Places Nomination www.nps.gov/history/nr/feature/weekly_features/NakashimaHouse-Studio.pdf
George Nakashima Studio www.nakashimawoodworker.com

Above: Ode to sculptor Noguchi, in walnut. Left: Traditional Japanese elements.