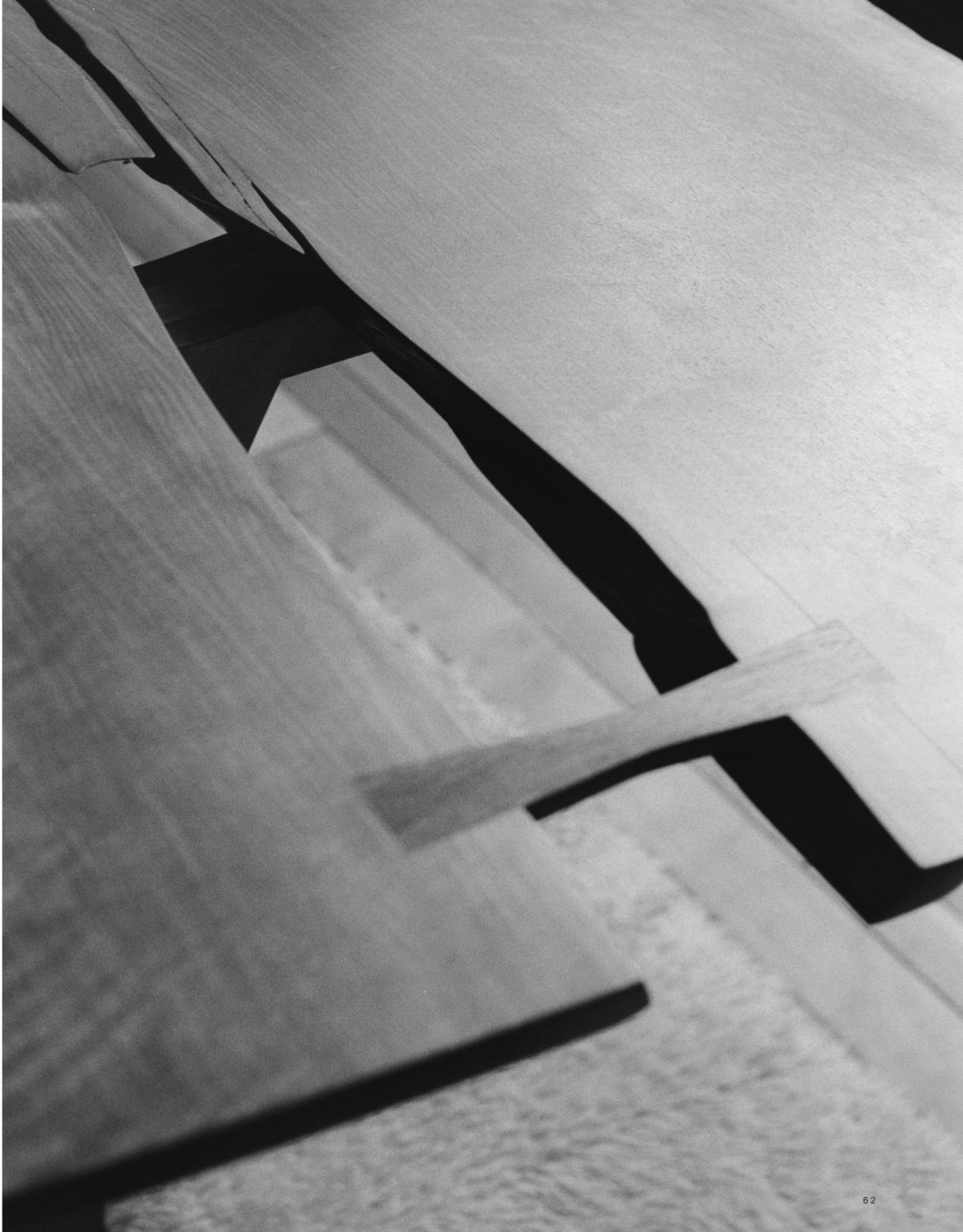




THE NAKASHIMA LEGACY.

Off an unassuming backwoods road in New Hope, Pennsylvania, is a sylvan oasis that looks like a 20th century version of a traditional Japanese village...





GEORGE NAKASHIMA WOODWORKERS, the Modernist American Craft-landmarked site designed by the eponymous Japanese-American architect and furniture designer between the 1940s and 1970s is shaded by English yew, Atlas cedar, Metasequoia, Ginkgo and Cryptomeria. The Japanese flowering cherry planted by Nakashima's father changes from white to deep pink in April, while in autumn the weeping thread leaf maples blaze sunset colours from orange through to purple. Dotted across the sprawling eight-acre site are thirteen elegant structures, eleven of them designed and hand-built by Nakashima, while two later additions – a storage shed housing the wood he left behind and a pole barn – were designed after his passing by his daughter and successor, Mira. Here, she explains why this piece of Japan in Pennsylvania is so much more than a family business...

AL: HOW DID NAKASHIMA WOODWORKERS COME TO BE WHAT IT IS NOW?

MN: My grandparents came to the West Coast from Japan around the turn of the century. My father was born in Spokane, Washington, and brought up in Seattle, while my mother was born and brought up in Seattle. They were Nisei; the second generation of Japanese in America. My dad went to the University of Washington where he studied forestry for two years, then architecture. From there he got a scholarship first to the École des Beaux-Arts in Fontainebleau, France, and then to Harvard, before switching to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He graduated in architecture in 1930. In 1934, he went to Japan and got a job with Antonin Raymond, who was at the forefront of modern architecture at the time. He sent my father to oversee a job in Pondicherry, India, at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It was a life-changing experience. Dad wouldn't have survived his incarceration during the second world war and built his furniture business without the spiritual strength he derived from it. Their philosophy of devotion to a higher power guided everything he did after he left the ashram. His work was not based on ego like most people educated in the West, but on the concept of surrender.

THEN THE WAR BROKE OUT AND HE CAME BACK TO THE STATES. WHAT LED HIM TO START A FURNITURE PRACTICE?

When the war broke out, all of his family were in the US, so he decided to come back. He stopped on the way in Tokyo and met my mother who was on her way back from Australia. Their families had apparently known each other in Seattle but they had never met. They fell in love, and were married in Los Angeles in 1941. Then they moved to Seattle. When my dad was looking for a job before he got married, he saw a Frank Lloyd Wright building under construction. He decided that if that was how they were doing architecture in the US, then he didn't want to be an architect anymore. So he started making furniture, working part-time as an architect to earn a living. The priest at the local Marian Missionaries, who ministered to the Japanese-American community, said he could use the machinery there in return for teaching woodwork to the boys' club. That's how he got started in Seattle. We were all incarcerated in March 1942, when I was still a tiny baby. Dad met a Japanese carpenter while he was in camp and apprenticed to him. He learned a lot of Japanese carpentry techniques that way, as well as how to make do and improvise with the materials he could find. In the meantime, Antonin Raymond and his wife Noëmi had left Japan and come to Pennsylvania, where they were fixing up a farmhouse. In 1943, he sponsored my father to come and work with him. That's how we got to Bucks County. My dad looked after the chickens on the farm until the war ended in 1945. Then he rented a cottage on Aquetong Road and started making furniture out of a garage.

KNOLL CONTRIBUTED TO THE SPREAD OF YOUR FATHER'S NAME AND DESIGNS, ESPECIALLY IN THE WEST. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?

When dad was working at the Raymonds' farm he met Hans Knoll who at the time was trying to set up a mass production furniture operation. There's some correspondence between dad and René d'Harnoncourt, who was the director of MoMA at the time, in the MoMA archives in which dad says "I don't like the smell of it", in reference to Knoll's furniture, but in the end he decided he would work with them. At the

beginning when Knoll started out, dad actually produced some of the designs at the shop here [at Nakashima Woodworkers] and sold them through Knoll. After a certain point, Knoll took over production and made the pieces in their factory. That changed their character, of course. My father wasn't happy but it got his name out there. He became known as one of the original Knoll designers.

THE RAYMONDS AND YOUR FATHER WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN BUILDING AWARENESS OF JAPANESE CULTURE AND AESTHETICS. HOW WAS THIS RECEIVED AT THE TIME?

When I was growing up, there was still a lot of anti-war sentiment. There weren't very many Japanese people on the East Coast, so we were pretty isolated. As far as the aesthetic goes, there were people in the Philadelphia community who were very interested in my father's work. Before the Raymonds and my father arrived, there was not too much Japanese influence. Awareness definitely increased after the war. There was a writer, Elizabeth Gordon, who wrote about Japanese design and aesthetics for *House Beautiful*. I think it was also during that time that [the German architect] Bruno Taut discovered the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto and publicised it. People became aware of this kind of wabi-sabi Zen concept of design. No one had really designed that way before. Bruno Taut was one, and so were the Raymonds. I don't know if they were actually in Japan when Yanagi Soetsu first began the Mingei folk art movement, but they brought that kind of aesthetic with them here and incorporated it into their interior designs and architecture using natural materials and colours. My parents definitely embraced the Mingei aesthetic.

YOUR FATHER CAME UP WITH SOME INGENUOUS WAYS TO INTEGRATE WESTERN AND JAPANESE INFLUENCES IN HIS WORK. CAN YOU TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT THAT?

Antonin Raymond actually wrote a book on Japanese architectural details, and he and my father found ways to adapt many of them to Western architecture. The Reception House [at Nakashima Woodworkers] is not a traditional Japanese house but there are a lot of traditional details, like the use of *kyokabe*, a natural stucco which has been

used in Kyoto for centuries, on the walls. Dad wanted the place to be self-sustaining. The Japanese penny round tiled bathtub is heated by a wood-burning boiler from Japan. The shoji window screens provide good insulation because there's air between the paper and the glass. The roof is supported by a scissor truss with three big posts that hold up the centre. The porch and Japanese room, used as a tea room and extra bedroom, is cantilevered off in different directions. This is definitely on a Japanese scale. If you sit low, it's a different perspective. Dad designed from memory. He'd do drawings to layout and build the foundations, then they built as they went. That's apparently how they worked in Japan too. He probably learned it from Raymond. The carpenters in Japan were trained in a long tradition and they didn't need engineers. It's not the same in the West. Dad told me that if you're building a house in Japan, you'd probably spend several years collecting the right pieces of wood. But there were some aspects of Western engineering that interested him. During his time in Paris in the 1930s he saw Le Corbusier's Swiss Pavilion under construction. He was fascinated by the strength and plasticity of the reinforced concrete. But he never switched completely to glass, steel, and concrete. He always wanted to warm things up with wood.

WHAT WAS THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR FATHER?

[Laughs] I was very definitely the understudy. He was pretty tough. I felt like I was being pushed around and not heard by either of my parents, so I went to the community school and took a course in assertiveness training. My father fired me after that. He didn't want to hear me being assertive. It's very Japanese, at least for that generation. They don't want to be challenged. I was hired and fired at least five times. It's a lesson in humility, I guess.

YOU TOOK OVER THE FURNITURE BUSINESS AFTER YOUR FATHER'S PASSING. HOW WERE YOU ABLE TO KEEP IT GOING?

That was a tough time. Dad didn't do any estate planning. I think he thought he was going to live forever. He worked until the year before he passed away, in 1990.



“In the last few months of his life,
he talked a lot more than he had before.”

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In the beginning, he didn't realise what the stroke had done to him but he came to understand that he needed to tell me more about what he did and why he did it. In the last few months of his life, he talked a lot more than he had before. Then in 1993, there was a big retrospective show of my dad's work in Japan, and after that the Michener Museum here in Pennsylvania asked me to design a memorial room for him. It gave us huge amounts of publicity. It was almost embarrassing, but the publicist knew that if we didn't do something, we were going to die. The following year the Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia put on a show of all the new designs I had developed since my dad passed. We called the show “Keisho,” which is Japanese for “continuation”. That idea - of continuing a tradition - is something that really resonates in Japan, far more than it does in the West.

HOW DO YOUR DESIGNS AND BUSINESS PRACTICES DIFFER FROM YOUR FATHER'S?

It's hard for me to define. My older son said my designs look more like spaceships than grandpa's did. I think I add more curves and different angles to the line than my father did, but basically it's the same kind of construction. We haven't done anything radically different. But the furniture business is much more democratic than it was when my father and mother were running everything. After my father died, the head man in the shop and I worked collaboratively on solving problems with lumber selection and furniture design. We've had an excellent manager for over 10 years now, who handles things like insurance, employee benefits, inventory and order flow, making sure that bills are paid and furniture is shipped in a timely fashion, the trees and grass are trimmed properly, we hire the right people to work with us. We also hired our first assistant designer, which was a tremendous help not only in wood selection and design development, but in creating drawings and facilitating sales. There are many more people in the office than there used to be, but I still do most of the work relating to exhibitions. This past year, I curated a small show at

the Michener and will be making a few pieces for a show in Tokyo next year. I am asked to do talks and to participate in symposia in different places and try to lead most of the guided tours of the property during the year. We try to stay true to the Nakashima philosophy, but have many more visitors than we used to have, which takes a great deal of time and energy.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE FOR NAKASHIMA WOODWORKERS? AND WHAT'S THE ROLE OF THE FOUNDATION OF PEACE?

Our hope is that the furniture business will thrive, using up at least most of the wood my father collected during his lifetime, and continuing to support a staff of talented woodworkers, administrators and designers, whether I am here or not. I also hope that the Foundation of Peace - which my father started in 1984 when he bought the most beautiful walnut log he had ever seen, and set out to make Altars of Peace for every continent from it - will continue its mission, creating cultural and spiritual links among all the peoples of the world. The Foundation is also responsible for maintaining and preserving the Arts Building and for ensuring that all the furniture here remains as an intact collection. As the property and buildings are now on the National Historic Register and the World Monuments Fund list we have received grants for research and repairs. Right now, we are preparing for a fund-raising event to celebrate the restoration of a beautiful Ben Shahn mosaic which was installed on the Arts Building wall in 1971, and to kick off the search for a site for the next Peace Altar on another continent. I guess Nakashima Woodworkers is somewhat of a cultural monument in the area. That's certainly what it's become. It started out as dad's attempt to earn a living, but he kept on building and building. He left architecture officially around 1941 but architecture never left him. He had all these ideas he wanted to experiment with at Nakashima Woodworkers. I also live here, and it's my home. **AL**

