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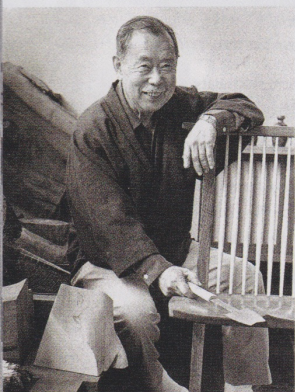
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The Nakashima Legacy



By Thomas Hine

MIRIAM CARPENTER SPENDS HER DAYS WORKING AT THE DESK that the great woodworker George Nakashima designed for himself. She works alongside Mira Nakashima, George's daughter, who has run the Nakashima workshops since her father's death in 1990. Mira worked at her father's side for two decades before that.

There is no place quite like the Nakashima studios, an arcadian Bucks County compound of structurally inventive yet meditative buildings designed and built over a thirty-year span by George Nakashima. It still operates much as it did when he was alive. Clients come to commission pieces of furniture and, with Carpenter and Mira Nakashima, select wood from the vast collection George started. Most of the time, the designers and the ten woodworkers base their designs on those developed by George decades ago, adapting them to the clients' needs and to the particular beauties and flaws of the wood being used. Each piece is unique, though most are variations on a small repertoire of designs. While George Nakashima believed in exploring and experimenting with design, he disdained novelty as an end in itself.

The Nakashima heritage has been enriched by Mira's original designs and her interpretations of her father's work. But Mira is seventy-one now, and looking to cut back from her six-days-a-week schedule at the workshops. Carpenter, twenty-nine, who has worked at the company for six years, represents another generation, one that never met, much less worked with, George Nakashima. "I think it is important that the legacy be continued," she says. It's an open question, though, whether the Nakashima aesthetic and philosophy can or should live on for another generation. If so, how? And what will the furniture look like?

George Nakashima (1905-1990)
with one of his Conoid chairs.

Mira Nakashima helping
her father in a photo taken
by Gretchen van Tassel for
the War Relocation
Authority, 1945.

Mira Nakashima.

Miriam Carpenter.

The wood pile.

Carpenter's drop-leaf dining
table (below and detail opposite)
is a modification of a design
George Nakashima did for the
Widdicomb-Mueller Corporation
in the late 1950s.





Visible in this interior view of the Conoid Studio building, which George Nakashima had erected on the property in 1957, are several examples of his work: the Conoid dining table with a one-piece English walnut top; a Persian walnut room divider with grilled Pandanus cloth sliding doors; Conoid cushion chairs; and a Kent hall lamp in the background.

The Carpenter coffee table by Miriam Carpenter, 2013, has a Claro walnut burl top.

Carpenter examines a wood slab.



Nakashima Woodworkers: An Evolving Legacy, an exhibition at Philadelphia's Moderne Gallery from September 20 to November 2, is a preliminary response to these questions. It consists of about two dozen new pieces, some adapted from George Nakashima designs, some by Mira, and several designed by Carpenter, including two tables, the furniture type for which George Nakashima was most renowned. One of these, dubbed the Carpenter coffee table, incorporates the irregular "free edge" for which Nakashima is famous, and its form—a piece of a tree sitting atop a geometric base—is similar to that of his iconic pieces.

The other, a drop-leaf dining table, is actually a modification by Carpenter of one Nakashima designed for the Widdicomb-Mueller Corporation in the late 1950s that was manufactured for several years. Carpenter modified the shape of its ovoid top to follow some ideas she is exploring on musical harmony and geometry. This table does not scream "Nakashima" but it has a delicacy and subtlety, and even sensuousness that many find in Nakashima designs.

"It is very difficult to make things for the first time," said Mira Nakashima in July, as she surveyed some of the finished work and other pieces in various states of incompleteness. The Carpenter coffee table, though it looks at first glance like a "typical" Nakashima design, was actually the most difficult of the new pieces to design. Indeed, it is the first design in the history of the Nakashima studio for which a mockup was made. It was a useful exercise, she says, but one that has been foreign to the Nakashima tradition, in which craftsmen realized design drawings with George or Mira looking over their shoulders.



"Dad left architecture and began making furniture because he wanted complete control of what he was making," Mira says. Yet he preached modesty in design and feared that designers' egos might get in the way of respecting the wood and producing good work. "When Dad talked to designers, he always talked about the craft of woodworking, and when he talked to woodworkers he always talked about design," she recalls. "Dad gave me twenty years of anti-egotism training." Pointing to a construction detail in one of the new pieces she designed, Mira observes, "Dad never did that, but he might have if he had had to." That sense, she adds, is a difficult one to pass on.



Insets: Michael Veith at work on a Chigaidana,
 George Nakashima's interpretation of a
 Japanese shelving unit, designed for
 Widdicomb-Mueller c. 1960. The piece
 returned to production in 2013 in American
 black walnut with all right angles and two
 "free" edges, which soften the design.

Detail of a Conoid bench with back in Scottish
 Wych elm burl, showing Nakashima's
 hallmark butterfly joint.



Interior of the Reception House, the last building Nakashima erected on the property, 1975-1977. Pictured are Conoid chairs in American black walnut and the Sanso dining table in book-matched English walnut

Mira Nakashima's Reflection coffee table, made of poplar and walnut, was designed for the *Poplar Culture* show at the Wharton Esherick Studio in 2012.

Both George and Mira Nakashima produced many designs over the years, but most of them were responses to clients' needs and specific commissions. Thus, this effort to produce so many new pieces might in itself be at odds with the Nakashima tradition, even as it attempts to define it.

By reinterpreting some George Nakashima designs that look atypical, the show serves notice that "Nakashima" is neither a style nor a brand to be exploited in the mass market. It is a family business, and Mira says she hopes that one of her children will play a role in defining its next generation, but that has yet to happen. In the meantime she felt it was time to work with the people who have been making the furniture to try to clarify what Nakashima stands for. Carpenter, an industrial design graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design who grew up not far from the Nakashima studio, dropped off a résumé just at the moment when Mira decided she needed an assistant designer.

Mira has said in the past that she decided to continue her father's practice out of a duty she felt to the "woodpile"—the two buildings full of filleted trees that her father amassed and she has augmented—and to the craftsmen who worked with him for decades. "But there is more to the legacy than that, some of it tangible, some of it quite subjective," she says.

"A part of what defines the legacy is philosophical and part of it is aesthetic," says Robert Aibel, owner of Moderne Gallery, and long a leading dealer in vintage George Nakashima works as well as a member of a committee that has recently been formed to advise the woodworking practice. "George believed that there was a universal



consciousness that drives the universe and informed his work. One should respect nature and let it speak for itself. What this means aesthetically is that one should interfere as little as possible. In shaping the work, one should enable the soul of the tree to express itself."

Mira Nakashima adds, "Dad said that wood is like fruit, always most wonderful just before it is rotten." People can look at a Nakashima tabletop with its writhing grain, irregular edges, and exquisitely reinforced weak spots and see the story of a life, one that might reflect their own. At the shop, workers labor with tiny picks and chisels to clarify and sharpen the story of the wood, which the design should not seek to upstage.

It is the expression of the wood, and not necessarily the design that gives each Nakashima piece its power, yet Mira and Aibel agree that there must always be new designs to keep the legacy alive. "People may hate some of the new works," Aibel says. "And people from the Nakashima studio may look at some of the works and say they are interesting but not Nakashima. I expect that to happen, and that sense of discovery is what will give the show its vibrancy."

"Some of the new designs forced us to use some methods that are new to us," Mira adds. "Some we will do again, others maybe not." **M**

Justin Taylor finishing
a book-matched
American black
walnut dining table.

