

# The Soul of Nakashima

Mira Nakashima  
carries her father's legacy  
forward

BY JONATHAN BINZEN



George Nakashima was one of a handful of woodworkers—along with Wharton Esherick, James Krenov, and Sam Maloof—whose furniture lit the fuse for a revival of woodworking in the 1970s, and whose work remains widely influential today among amateur and professional woodworkers alike. These pioneers embodied the merging of the designer with the craftsman and a maker's life with his work. For Nakashima, like Esherick and Maloof, the most powerful expression of his philosophy, furniture style, and way of working is found in the buildings and landscape he crafted bit by bit throughout his life.

Since Nakashima's death in 1990, not much has changed at the leafy hillside property on Aquetong Road in New Hope, Pa., where he settled with his wife and young daughter in 1946. And that in itself is slightly miraculous.

A dozen or so craftsmen still take projects from raw planks to completion one by one; the enormous lumber sheds are still bursting with some of the biggest and most beautiful slabs of flitch-cut Eastern black walnut ever sawn; the nine-acre property and the houses, workshops, sheds, and other buildings Nakashima built on it are still scrupulously maintained; and the finished furniture being produced there bears

**Pass it on.** Mira Nakashima carries on the designs and the company started by her father, George. That's her (top) outside the Nakashima chair shop in 2012, and (inset) sharing her father's workbench in 1945.



**Life and work are linked.** George Nakashima's Conoid studio (above) is one of more than a dozen buildings nestled on the nine-acre hillside property. Just steps away are the stone and wood house he built where Mira and her brother Kevin grew up, the main shop (below), where David Lipton puts the finishing touches on a conoid bench, and a handful of wood sheds (right), where mountains of air-dried planks wait to become furniture.



close comparison to the pieces made during Nakashima's lifetime. Twenty-two years after his death, Nakashima's business is still functioning—and flourishing—much as it did in his lifetime, now under the guidance of his daughter, Mira.

It sounds like a natural transition—one Nakashima leading to another. And Mira, with two degrees in architecture and two decades working alongside her father, could hardly have been better trained to take his place.

Yet when her father died, Mira wasn't at all sure what to do. George Nakashima, reflecting his Samurai ancestry, was, Mira says, "very strict, very authoritarian. I wasn't allowed to question him. He fired me twice for being too assertive." He could be an intimidating figure to his workmen, as well, and uncompromising even with his customers. If a client didn't like what he proposed to make for them,



Nakashima would be likely to say, “then go to Macy’s.” Mira had no idea whether she could make the shift from never questioning authority to exercising it herself.

“But after Dad died,” Mira says, “I looked at the woodpile, and I looked at the men in the shop, and I looked at the stack of orders, and I thought, I guess we’ve got to keep going.”

Within the first few months, half the customers on the waiting list canceled their orders. Morale was low, and a few of the craftsmen quit. But most stayed, helping pull the company through some lean years in the early 1990s.

Staying is something Nakashima craftsmen are known for. Many on the roster of European-trained and local woodworkers who worked with George measured their tenure in decades. Jerry Everett, who grew up a mile and a half away and became shop foreman when

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George died, was hired out of high school and is entering his 43rd year with the company. Two other current craftsmen, including Mira’s husband, Jon Yarnall, are closing in on 40 years.

Asked what accounts for the record of longevity, Everett recalled that, working with George, “it was seldom that you were rushed to do anything. A table took however long it took to make it perfect.”

Yarnall credits his father-in-law with creating a workplace where craftsmen could discover “a meditative aspect to woodwork. It’s not that we’re sitting back and admiring the wood; we give it tough treatment. But it’s a dialogue with the wood, not the craftsman imposing his will. The wood is working on you while you are working on the wood.”

Mira has written of her father that, like the Shakers, whose furniture he deeply admired, he “revered meticulous work as an expression of the spirit.” Despite the financial





**It takes gnarly wood to make a Nakashima table.** In the main wood shed (above), assistant designer Miriam Carpenter and shop foreman Jerry Everett mark out bookmatched walnut slabs for a table. The table at right, built in the 1970s from an extraordinary log of English walnut, features full-width slabs linked with signature Nakashima butterflies.



incentives of outsourcing and tooling up for production, she's determined to maintain that tradition.

As shop foreman, Everett tries to do things as George did. He still has individual craftsmen build each piece from start to finish. "I bring the lumber in," he says, "and from there it's their piece. As long as it comes out looking the way a Nakashima piece is supposed to, I don't care how they get there."

Another draw for the craftsmen, of course, is the wood. "We're all born woodworkers," Everett says. "We're doing what we love, doing it in a beautiful place, and we get to work on fantastic wood—wood that we wouldn't even see otherwise."

Wood has always been the heart of the matter at Nakashima Studio. For George, who studied forestry before turning to architecture, woodworking provided a means of marrying his love of trees with his love of design. Cutting logs through-and-through and incor-

porating their free edges in his pieces enabled him to infuse functional furniture with the spirit of raw nature.

Nakashima had an unerring eye for the great slab and for how much of its natural edge to leave untouched, but his genius lay in combining those erratic slabs with rectilinear bases, turned legs, or spindles. The aesthetic he developed, inspired in part by Japanese architecture, brought him international acclaim and continues to be widely imitated—though rarely brought off with the aplomb of Nakashima originals.

Nakashima's trove of dazzling wood will not be running dry any time soon. The last time business manager John Lutz checked, they had a 68-year supply—and they are still buying. "Wood is king here,"

Lutz says. The primary lumber-storage area—there are five all told—is a metal-frame barn 60 yards long and 15 yards wide, and neck-craning stacks of fitch-cut logs line both sides along its entire length. A recent inventory of the wood stash, which required moving, measuring, and photographing every plank on the property, occupied two apprentices for eight months.

Over the past 22 years, Mira Nakashima has designed a range of new furniture, but her primary focus remains on producing pieces that were in the Nakashima catalog before her father died. New designs, she says, come "mostly by request or necessity." Although she has clearly succeeded in taking on the decisive role at Nakashima, she remains the dutiful daughter. "Hopefully," she says, "I've absorbed enough that I do things as he would have liked." □

*Jonathan Binzen is a senior editor.*

## Online Extra

To hear an exclusive interview with Mira Nakashima, go to [FineWoodworking.com/extras](http://FineWoodworking.com/extras).



## HOW-TO: DEALING WITH DEFECTS

In his book *The Soul of a Tree*, George Nakashima wrote that a tree, like a piece of fruit, is most delectable when it's just on the verge of rotting. Mira Nakashima shares her father's sweet tooth for wood's imperfections, and decades of dealing with cracks and rot, bugholes and knots have produced a special expertise at Nakashima Studio. Mira, assistant designer Miriam Carpenter, and shop foreman Jerry Everett explained some of their strategies.

**Worm holes and bug holes**—If nobody's living in there, a lot of times we let them go. Other times we clean them out and fill them with Plastic Wood tinted with oil paint or powdered pigments to match the wood. For bigger holes, we'll fill with epoxy, sometimes mixed with sawdust—a trick we learned from Sam Maloof.

**Cracks**—If a crack is stable, we might leave it alone or fill it with epoxy or Plastic Wood. But if it seems likely to run, we'll stabilize it by inlaying a butterfly key across it. We use butterflies for visual effect, but they are also structural. We'll sometimes put butterflies on the underside of a top if the cracking is severe or if adding more butterflies on top would look too busy.

**Knots**—If a knot is loose during machining, we'll remove it so we don't lose it up the dust-

collection chute, and then epoxy it in afterward. If a knot is missing or too damaged, we'll sometimes find a matching knot and shape it to fit the knothole.

**Rot**—We do our best to slice away rot or dress down a board to remove it. But if necessary, we treat it with Rot Fix, an epoxy that penetrates soft fibers and hardens them up.

**Cupping**—If a big slab is cupped, we'll cut kerfs along the grain on the underside to relax it and then attach a couple of cleats to pull it flat. To cut the kerfs, we set the circular sawblade to about three-quarters of the thickness of the slab.

When a small board is cupped, we'll sometimes put it outside on the wet grass, convex side up toward the sun. That warps it toward flat, and we can screw on some cleats to hold it there.

Whatever defects we're dealing with, it helps to remember that a lot of times, the pieces that look most hopeless in the shed turn out the best once we've got them finished.

