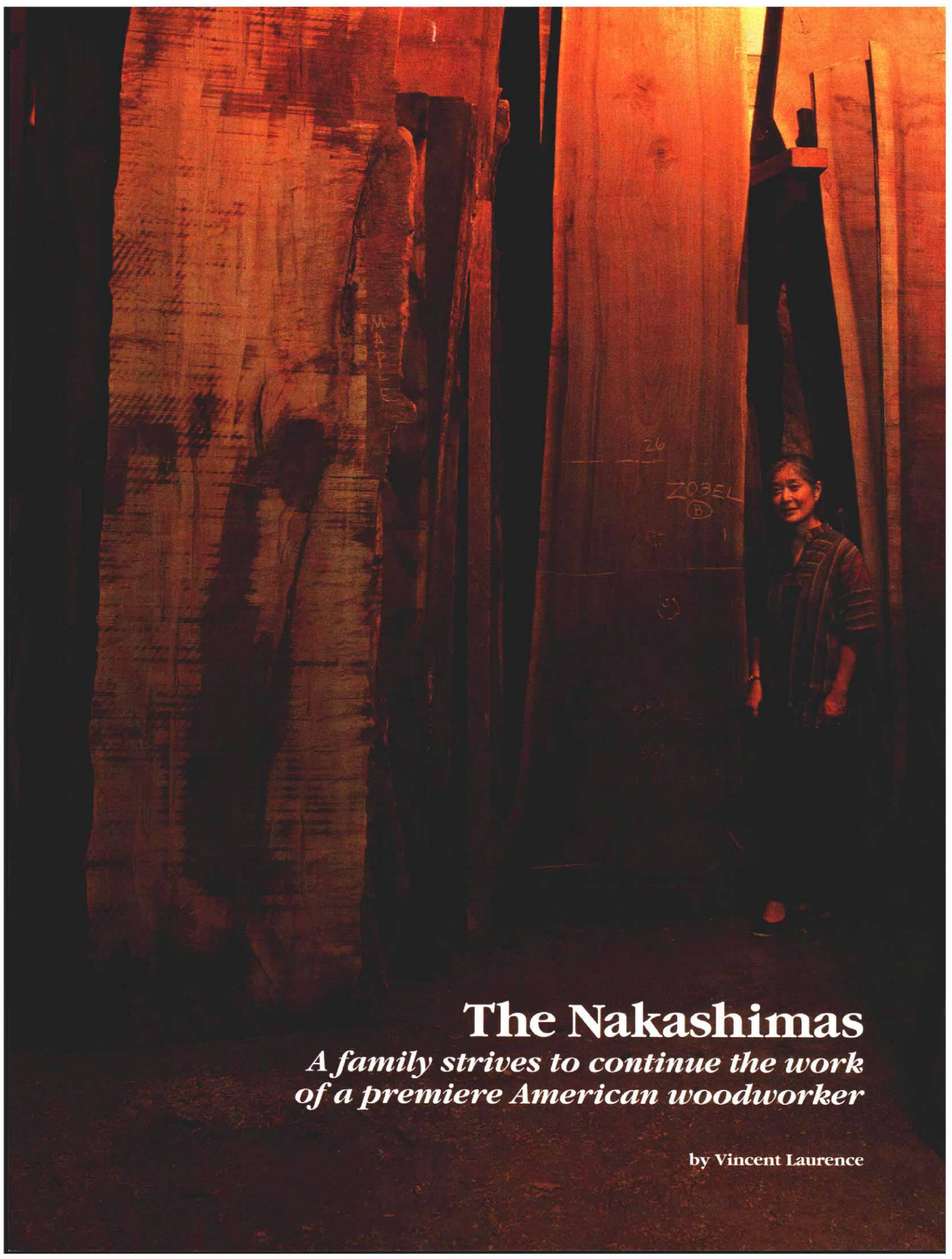



# The Nakashimas

## *A family strives to continue the work of a premiere American woodworker*

by Vincent Laurence

Trees were George Nakashima's life. He hiked through them, climbed them, sojourned among them. He also made his livelihood from them while he rose to prominence as a craft woodworker after World War II.

Nakashima planted trees, lots of non-native species chosen for beauty and companionship rather than utility. On the right as you pull into the driveway of his New Hope, Penn., estate is a Japanese cedar, or cryptomeria, a tree often used for columns in Buddhist temples and shrines. A little farther along is a Chinese chestnut. Down the hill by the pool are several dawn redwoods, leafy conifers native to China. Apple and cherry trees dot the property. And between the design studio and the office are two of the most beautiful Japanese maples I've ever seen. George Nakashima clearly loved trees.

Nakashima died in 1990 at the age of 85 (see the box on p. 95 for a brief biographical portrait), but his legacy and his business live on. His widow, Marion, and son, Kevin, take care of the finances. Daughter Mira runs the business on a day-to-day basis and, perhaps most important, is responsible for the firm's design work. Business, though, has slowed considerably. Although the Nakashima workshops still design and build furniture, craftsmen and family alike are finding commissions harder to come by than they did when George was alive.

## A daughter apprenticed to her father

Mira is well-trained for her role as the studio's new creative chief. After obtaining architecture degrees from Harvard and Waseda University in Tokyo, she returned in 1969 to New Hope to become her father's assistant. For the next 21 years, she worked alongside George, often taking his concept sketches and turning them into working drawings.

For most of that time, their relationship was much like a traditional Japanese apprenticeship—the master never reveals anything explicitly, trusting instead in the apprentice to learn by observation. After a stroke in October 1989, however, George became much more open and communicative, explaining his designs to Mira and passing on what he'd learned in nearly 50 years of designing and building furniture.

Mira is not the only link to her father. Many of the craftsmen working under her direction, including her husband, Jonathan Yarnall, have been with the Nakashimas 20 years or more. Jerry Everett, the current foreman, started in 1970. He's responsible for most of the lumber selection these days. Two

***Mira Nakashima-Yarnall is walking in her father's footsteps.*** *Mira is now responsible for design work at the Nakashima workshop. At right is a Conoid chair, one of her father's signature pieces.*

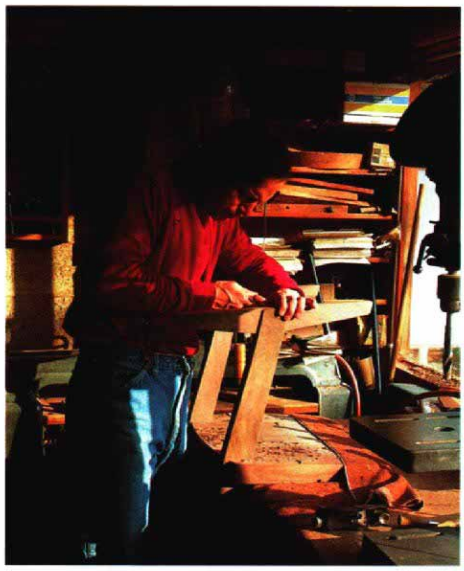
Photo at right: George Erml

**Peace Altar II** ***under construction.*** *It took a crew to move this altar, which weighs nearly a quarter-ton. Mira Nakashima (far left) looks on as foreman Jerry Everett measures to determine the location of the base. Mira's husband, Jonathan Yarnall, is at Everett's left.*

other employees, Mario Gioia and Adam Martini, have been working for the Nakashimas since the 1950s. Such loyalty is rare in this era, but there are rewards. As Jerry said while I was admiring some 2½-in.-thick walnut boards, 60 in. across and 14 ft. long, "You get spoiled working with this wood."

## Demand for furniture output declines

Mira buys considerably less wood these days than her father once did—maybe 50 logs last year compared to the well over 100 that George bought in his last year. Even so, the Nakashimas are in no danger of running out any time soon. There are numerous woodsheds on the property, including a huge pole barn stuffed to the rafters with incredible planks from around the world. As if that weren't enough, there's another warehouse down the road in Philadelphia with more than 100,000 bd. ft. of dry lumber ready for use.



***A classic endures.*** *Jonathan Yarnall works on one of George's most popular designs, the Conoid chair.*

One reason for buying less wood is that business, and therefore wood consumption, has been much slower lately. It's way down from the flurry of activity that followed the big American Craft Council show in 1989, "George Nakashima: Full Circle." The sales generated by that show and by a fire that same year, which destroyed nearly 150 pieces in the home of one of George's major patrons, kept the shop hopping for three years. But since 1993, business has slowed to the point where shop craftsmen now work only four days a week. One even expressed doubt about whether any of them would be around in a year. Times are hard.

Times have been hard before, though. Mira tells a story of George walking through the chair shop, muttering in a de-



Photos except where noted: Vincent Laurence

pressed tone, "Anyone want to buy a woodworking business?" Hours later, after some therapeutic rambling through the woodsheds, he returned smiling, saying, "We can't quit—we've got to use all this wood."

### Still using George's designs

Much of the studio work these days is furniture designed by George, including the Conoid chair, as shown in the bottom right photo on p. 93. Many of George's designs are called Conoid pieces, named after the studio in which they were designed (see the top photo at right). It's not just production line work, though. Because the Nakashimas work exclusively with flitchsawn lumber, there are a lot of decisions to make about where to cut and join these boards, especially for the live-edged tables and desks that were among George's most popular pieces.

And a major project that George began in the mid 1980s continues today. As much a spiritual man as a woodworker, George had a dream of building an altar for each continent on the globe. The first, completed in 1986 and placed in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, was dedicated to the peoples of North America. The second altar was being built when I visited last August (see the photo at left). It is to be placed in the Academy of the Sciences' Exhibition Hall in Moscow and will be dedicated to the people of Russia and the continent of Europe.

### Carrying on a tradition

I asked Mira, who is more a designer than a woodworker, why she has stayed with it. What is it about her job that keeps her going? She laughed and said: "It's fun, I've always enjoyed making things, ever since I was a little girl. And although I just physically can't handle most of these boards—they're so big—I can be part of the creation of these beautiful objects."

And now a third generation wants to get involved. Mira's eldest son, Satoru, recently expressed an interest in the family business. Ru, as he's known by his family, was particularly close to George and has done a fair amount of woodworking on his own. Unfortunately, the business just won't support another employee right now—not even a Nakashima. □

*Vincent Laurence is an associate editor of* Fine Woodworking.

## *George Nakashima, woodworker*

**Born in Spokane, Wash., in 1905, George Nakashima spent his youth roaming the mountains and forests of his home state. He went on to study architecture and earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Washington and a master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.**

**After a two-year stint as an architectural designer for the Long Island (N.Y.) State Park Commission, he spent four years traveling in Europe and Asia, eventually taking a job in an architectural firm in Tokyo. He was transferred to India to supervise the construction of a dormitory for a spiritual community and became a disciple of that community's leader.**

***A wellspring of design inspiration,*** *The Conoid studio is but one of the structures George built on his Pennsylvania property. The studio is named for its roof, which is a section through a cone.*

**In 1939, he left India for China, but the war between Japan and China forced his return to Japan. There he met and became engaged to his future wife, Marion, another Japanese American. They returned to the United States in 1940, settling in Seattle, and were married the following year.**

**He set up his first furniture shop in Seattle in 1941, but he was interned in Idaho along with thousands of other Japanese Americans in 1942. It was there that he met an old Japanese carpenter who taught him a great deal about wood and tools. Life in the camp was hard, though, and in 1943, George asked his old boss from Tokyo, Antonin Raymond, to sponsor the Nakashima family's release. They moved to the Raymond farm in New Hope, Penn., and worked as general laborers. A year later, they rented a small house in which they lived until 1946. That year, they moved to their own piece of property and started building, a process that would continue for more than three decades.**

Photo: Alec Waters

***Butterfly keys save boards,*** *preventing checks from spreading and providing a decorative element as well.*

**From the 1940s until his death in 1990, George Nakashima built nearly a dozen structures on his property in New Hope. He also put in ponds, built a small foot bridge, planted trees and built stone walls. All the while, he was designing and building furniture with an emphasis on craft and on preserving the spirit of the tree. George had all his wood flitchsawn (cut through and through, as he called it), often using it just as nature provided it. He didn't eliminate sapwood and used butterfly keys to prevent checks from spreading. He finished his work with a tung oil varnish rather than lacquer or polyurethane. All of this may seem tame today, but in the design-for-industry and make-it-uniform-and-modern climate of the 1940s, it was revolutionary.** ***—V.L.***

***Live edges are part of the design.*** *George's intent in working wood was to give trees a second life.*