



Beyond Nakashima and Noguchi

Western aficionados are only starting to discover modernism from Japan





Clockwise from top left: Studio Kenzo Tange furniture for Tokyo's Sogetsu Art Center gracing the cover of an Architect Design Series catalog from 1960. The catalog accompanying the Japan Export Furniture Manufacturer's Association's 1961 exhibition in the U.S. Teak veneering the plywood sled base of a lounge chair, circa 1960, by the Junzo Sakakura Architectural Office for Tendo Mokko. A children's study station that folds into a shoji screen, a Yujiro Yamaguchi design for Fuji Motors Corporation, circa 1958. From the same time, Katsuo Matsumura's reclining lounge chair as seen in the Architect Design Series catalog. A portrait of Isamu Kenmochi in Kenmochi Design Associates's chair in steel and acrylic, 1969. For Tendo, his cocktail table, circa 1965, in laminated Brazilian rosewood. In molded rosewood plywood, the manufacturer's Butterfly stool, circa 1954, by Sori Yanagi's Yanagi Design Institute.

Noguchi, point to an enormous appetite for Japanese modernist aesthetics. Thus it is hard to explain the paucity of this material at auction or at design galleries in the U.S. It has been difficult to find much beyond Sori Yanagi's plywood Butterfly stool, a design in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art; an occasional rattan or laminated-wood chair by Isamu Kenmochi, perhaps the George Nelson of Japan; an equally rare commissioned bench by Kenzo Tange; and the later, postmodern furniture in acrylic and steel by Shiro Kuramata. Until relatively recently, that is.

In 2007, the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, now the Noguchi Museum, in Long Island City, New York, presented "Design: Isamu Noguchi and Isamu Kenmochi." The exhibition, documenting their brief collaboration, in 1950, may have opened a door that Richard Wright of Chicago's Wright auction house has enthusiastically stepped through. Already a market-maker with Charles and Ray Eames and Harry Bertoia, Wright held a 2013 sale that included a rare Kenmochi cocktail table with scrolling legs. It was produced in laminated Brazilian rosewood—by Japan's Herman Miller equivalent, Tendo Mokko, also the maker of the Butterfly



It is astonishing how very little we Westerners know about postwar Japanese design. Astonishing, too, is how little of this material arrived in the U.S. and Europe during the period or has surfaced during the past 20 years, as the market for mid-century furniture has boomed. Think about it. Japanese design has been in dialogue with Western modernism since Christopher Dresser's epochal voyage in 1876, and the lines of influence have run in both directions.

Dresser brought back to London decorative motifs from Japan, with their reverence for nature, and incorporated them into the aesthetic movement, a precursor to art nouveau. He also brought back a geometric austerity, manifest in his silver teapots and tureens—foreshadowing the Bauhaus and much mid-century Good Design. Then, beginning in 1917, Frank Lloyd Wright spent time in Tokyo to work on the Imperial Hotel, but he was already an avid collector of Japanese prints, and his Prairie School houses arguably emulate the horizontal lines and fenestration of traditional Japanese architecture. Bruno Taut left Berlin in 1933 to settle in Japan as a critic and teacher. And Charlotte Perriand spent two feverishly creative periods there, from 1940 to '42 and from 1953 to '55.

All this contact influenced Japanese architects and furniture designers, whose agenda became to invent their own version of international modernism. Trade associations and government agencies were formed to foster and support this effort, specifically to stimulate the American and European appetite for exports. After all, Japanese postwar manufacturers of other types of consumer goods were achieving phenomenal success and brand recognition: Nikon, Sony, and Toyota to name but a few.

Stateside, the critical and commercial success, both then and now, of two Japanese-Americans, George Nakashima and Isamu



offer was a set of four graceful, delicately scaled teak dining chairs designed by Katsuo Matsumura for his own residence. Continuing the hunt for material, Wright specialist Peter Jefferson has been traveling to Tokyo to mine a single trove of tables and chairs. He has yet to see a case piece, probably because storage tended to be built-in.

With so much to discover and learn, this dynamic and exciting segment of the market presents a potential trajectory similar to that taken by Brazilian design. What can we expect—or hope—to see over the next few years? Waiting to be truly discovered is a range of stacking, folding, and knock-down designs, all tailored to Japan's relatively limited spaces. Among the standouts are children's designs: a group of demountable furniture in acrylic and tubular aluminum, with elastic strips, and a study station, which folds into a shoji screen.

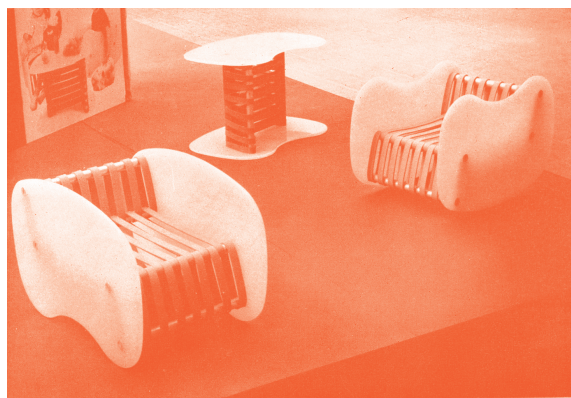
Blue-chip status will go to Kenmochi, of course, as well as to the prolific Riki Watanabe, regarded as the Eames of Japan. Watanabe's rope-seated chair gained international recognition, helping to nudge Japanese modernism on its course—chairs, new to the residential market in a country accustomed to sitting on mats, were literally being designed from the ground up. Look, too, for projects executed for the Mitsukoshi and Takashimaya department stores, important venues for disseminating modernist ideas along with the merchandise.

At press time, you could purchase Tange's beech table, designed for the Sumi Memorial Hall in Ichinomiya, from Galerie Downtown François Laffanour, Paris. Germany's Modern Design Connection was offering the result of a furniture competition: a spectacular freeform sofa by Taichiro Nakai. Sorry, you just missed it.

—Larry Weinberg

stool—and was intended for serial production. Wright ultimately sold the table for more than \$30,000, well above the high estimate of \$5,000.

Wright has subsequently sold Kenmochi lounge chairs and stacking stools along with his rattan furniture suite including the Round chair—Japanese modernism incarnate. The repertoire has furthermore expanded to include other plywood pieces for Tendo, notably a prototype steel-legged chair in the Eames mode, a triangular stool in teak veneer, and a lounge chair with a sled base, intended for use on tatami mats, by an architect who had studied with Le Corbusier. Also on



幼児のための家具 設計 柴田 巖 乳白のアクリライトとアルミのパイプとゴムテープを使った幼児のための家具である。この種のよい家具の少ない現在、この試作は興味あるデザインである。

furnitures for baby Iwao Shibata design



Clockwise from top left: For Yamakawa Rattan, Kenmochi Design Associates's Round settee, chair, and planter, circa 1965. The third-prize winner in Italy's Concorso Internazionale del Mobile in 1955, a sofa by Taichiro Nakai. A promotional photograph showing how to disassemble Iwao Shibata's 1950's children's furniture in acrylic and tubular aluminum with elastic strips. Reiko Tanabe's teak-veneered plywood stool, circa 1966, for Tendo. Riki Watanabe Design Office's 1952 chair, in oak and rope, for Yokoyama Kogyo.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, TOKYO; COURTESY OF WRIGHT; COURTESY OF MODERN DESIGN CONNECTION AND 1STDIBS