

# all things being equal

Traditional and Modern Furniture by Nancy N. Johnston

While masterpieces remain strong in all categories, recent media coverage has cited a weakness in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English, European, and American furniture markets. In her article “Bargain Time for Antiques” (2/08/07), Kate Murphy of *The New York Times* says one of the reasons for the soft market is a current preference for the modern aesthetic.

In reviewing the work of modern furniture makers one could easily appreciate this furniture as an art form. While traditional furniture is most certainly as artistic, evident in the sculptural, curvaceous lines of a 1740s Queen Anne side chair or a sleek 1815 Classical pier table, period furniture is often thought of as utilitarian. This, however, is a misconception, since, as with modern craftsmen, the aesthetic quality of an object was a primary objective of the period artisan. Attempting to address this way of thinking years ago, dealer Albert Sack designed an ad for the Israel Sack Galleries in New York City, in which he placed a dressing table within a frame with the caption “Not all masterpieces hang on a wall.” Still, even Israel Sack, Inc., could not get popular thinking to recognize the artistic merit of antiques.

Perhaps a way to think about the similarities between traditional period furniture and modern and contemporary furniture is to make a comparison. I thought a good place to start was with the furniture of George Nakashima (1904–1990), a Japanese American studio furniture designer whose innovative, organic designs focused on using gnarled and figured slabs of wood, which harkened to the woods selected for earlier period furniture. I had the pleasure of visiting with Mira Nakashima in New Hope,

Pennsylvania. Mira, George’s daughter, has been in charge of the company’s design and woodworking supervision since the death of

her father. I saw masterpiece after masterpiece and, with a two year waiting list, the Nakashima woodshop is working in full force. Among other things, we discussed the record setting 1988 “Arlyn” table (its name derived from the first names of the clients who commissioned it) that sold at Sotheby’s in December 2006 for \$822,400 (with buyers premium). I asked Mira if her father



Chippendale mahogany tilt-top table, circa 1760.  
Pook and Pook auction, June 1999.  
Courtesy of Pook and Pook. Downingtown, Pa.



was influenced by earlier American or other cabinet makers or craftsmen. She explained “The furniture and installations that her father designed hearken back to early American furniture in their economy of means and their respect for the unique qualities of each wood.” When looking to collect,” she stated, “One must look at the function, design, and craftsmanship. That harmony is what a collector should look for.” This combination is evident in furniture from any period.

The Nakashima family believe what must have been on the minds of early furniture craftsmen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was a commitment to overall form and detail, functionality, and the hand selection of the very best wood one could afford. One might compare the kinship of an eighteenth-century pie crust table sold at Pook and Pook in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, in June 1999, with the Nakashima “Arlyn” table sold at Sotheby’s. Although the pie crust table

*George Nakashima, “Arlyn” table, 1988. Redwood, American black walnut, East Indian laurel, madrona burl. The Krosnick Collection of Masterworks by George Nakashima, lot 313, December 15, 2006. Courtesy of Sotheby’s, New York.*

might be deemed formal, it certainly stands its ground on artistic merits.

Citing record sales last year at Rago Arts and Auctions, Lambertville, New Jersey, David Rago explained “The furniture of Nakashima, Wharton Esherick and their contemporaries is well made, relatively inexpensive and just really good material.” He added, “This market has room to grow.” When remembering his good friend and visionary collector, the late David Whitney, who reveled in combining the unexpected, Rago discussed a growing trend, saying “People are [beginning to] realize [that] all periods are connected, recognizing the correlation of, to name a few, early American, European and /or Modern, and [will] create cohesive collections bringing it all together.”

When Alan Miller, furniture consultant of Quakertown, Pennsylvania, was asked his

opinion on the thinking of early American craftsmen he replied, “They respected wood enormously and went to great lengths in getting the very best. In fact, grading the figure of wood was an industry in and of itself.” This appreciation of the materials is shared by the philosophy of George Nakashima, who, his daughter relays, felt it was “the woodworker’s responsibility to the tree itself, which has been sacrificed, to live again in the woodworker’s hand.”

While every object, whether period or modern, does not utilize wood with strong figuring, many of the principles are shared, with aesthetic quality in the forefront. Regardless of style, furniture, both antique and modern, should be considered in the realm of sculpture and art. @

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