

TITLE

"A LIFE IN WOOD"

GRADE LEVEL: MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

DISCIPLINE: American History, Government, Arts and Crafts**TOPIC:** George Nakashima: American Craftsman, Architect, Artist; 1905-1990**STANDARDS:** 1) Education for American Democracy, Theme 3: We the People;
2) UCLA Public History Initiative: Standards 8,9,10 World War II;
3) Postwar America, Contemporary America.
4) World History Standards: Religions of the World.**OBJECTIVES:**

- Students will be able to describe key elements of George Nakashima's life: his education, his work, his philosophy.
- Students will be able to explain how his craftsmanship with wood extended into art and became an expression of his beliefs through the creations he made.
- Students will be able to identify ways in which his work was influenced by his experience and exposure to different cultures.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What about George Nakashima's life influenced him most in the creation of his work?
- Is there a difference between craft and art, and, if so, how does one know the difference?
- How does art become a way to express one's philosophy and spiritual being?

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Projector
- Loose-leaf paper
- Printer paper + printer + ink
- Pencils

CLASSROOM HOURS NEEDED:

1 to 2 class periods (~1.5 hours)

FINAL ASSESSMENT TYPE:

Worksheet / Essay

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MAIN ACTIVITIES:

- Read the obituary from the New York Times about Nakashima's life and complete the accompanying worksheet (Appendix A).
- View the short film:
 - Landscape episode of Craft in America, Nakashima Woodworking (10 min.)
 - [Nakashima Woodworking](#). For a shorter film or for use with an elementary class, this trailer (3 min) may be useful: [Watch George Nakashima, Woodworker - The definitive documentary Online](#)
- Use the film to discuss with the class some of the following questions and topics:
 - Spirituality: What do you think that means? Use quotes, there are four of them, that are on the main page of Nakashima's Woodworkers: [Philosophy - George Nakashima Woodworkers](#). Appendix B also contains a quote of Nakashima's that also can be used. These quotes could be displayed or prepared in advance as a resource for the students.
 - How did the time in the internment camp influence his life and his craft?
 - Is there a difference between art and craft? Can something be both?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

- 1) From one of the resources displaying his work, select one or more pieces that you are drawn to: Explain how this piece (or pieces) affect you?
- 2) Research other elements of his work that show multiple cultural influences in his work: Shaker, Rural/Country, Japanese, Indian, European.

REFLECTION/ ASSESSMENT

For Art classes, this can become an entry point for a piece that a student will create that integrates and embodies characteristics and beliefs of the artist. In History or Social Studies classes, students can write an essay expanding on one of the activities where they explore the intersection of arts and crafts with history, philosophy, and one's personal life's experiences.

The lesson, as it is built around arts and crafts, can also encourage students to express their learning through other art forms: poetry, painting, photography, video, collage, etc.



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QUESTIONS

- 1) Using the paragraphs at the end of the article, create a timeline of the dates that mark significant events from his birth in 1905 until 1981.
- 2) From the obituary's first section (4 paragraphs), summarize in your own words who George Nakashima was and what he was known for.
- 3) After creating his longtime dream, the "Altar for Peace" for the Cathedral at St. John the Divine in New York in 1986, he said, "It was a great tree." What do you think he meant by that? What sort of connection was he making between the wood and its placement in the Cathedral?
- 4) Going back to the timeline created in question, identify the ways the various events in his life shaped his philosophy and career.

APPENDIX A: OBITUARY

George Nakashima Is Dead at 85; Designer and Master Woodworker

By WOLFGANG SAXON

George Nakashima, the master woodworker and designer who sought to capture the noble character of trees in chairs, tables and cabinetry, died on Friday at his home in New Hope, Pa. He was 85 years old.

His family said he died after a brief illness.

Mr. Nakashima worked with untrimmed slabs of wood, particularly black walnut and redwood, often leaving cracks and holes in the final product.

For decades, his Bucks County workshop could hardly keep up with the demand for his pieces. He did not advertise or expand, even as some of his work fetched more than \$10,000.

Mr. Nakashima's work appeared in the Museum of Modern Art and many galleries, including the Renwick Gallery in Washington. He made furnishings for Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller's country home in Tarrytown, N.Y., and designed interiors for Columbia University, Mt. Holyoke College and the International Paper Corporation.

'It Was a Great Tree'

A seeker after spiritual peace, Mr. Nakashima saw the fruition of a longtime dream on New Year's Eve of 1986 with the dedication of his massive, heart-shaped "Altar for Peace" at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. Cut from a 125-foot English walnut tree from Long Island and weighing three quarters of a ton, the planed and sanded altar was finished with his trademark butterfly rosewood inlays and topped with a bonsai tree.

"It was a great tree," Mr. Nakash-



The New York Times, 1981
George Nakashima

ima said. "Trees with this character should have a special meaning and special use."

Last July, he was the first honoree in a series of retrospectives at the American Craft Museum in Manhattan. Oddly, as the museum celebrated him as a "living national treasure," a plumber's blowtorch sparked a fire that destroyed a home in Princeton, N.J., with 111 pieces of his work inside. Only two pieces from the collection survived: a board-room table and picture frame loaned to the museum for the exhibition by the owners.

Interred During War

George Nakashima was born on May 24, 1905, in Spokane, Wash., to parents who had emigrated from Japan. He studied architecture at the University of Washington and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and earned a diploma at the Ecole Americaine des Beaux Arts in Paris.

Circling the world on a spiritual quest, he lived for two years as a monk in an Indian ashram. Then in 1937 he went to work in the Tokyo office of the American architect Antonin Raymond. While there, he studied Japanese techniques of carpentry, to which he had become increasingly devoted.

Having returned home and married in 1938, he and his young wife, the former Marion Okamura, and their infant daughter, Mira, were interned in Idaho as Japanese-Americans in 1942. There, he studied with an old Japanese carpenter until Mr. Raymond, who had a farm and office in New Hope, managed to have him released.

Mr. Nakashima moved to New Hope in 1945 and started a furniture business with \$100. He considered his craft an art and only occasionally sold to manufacturers or retailers.

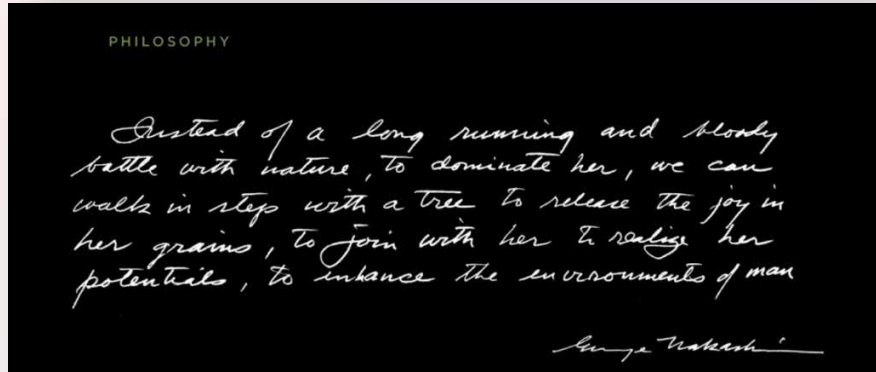
Most of his work was made to order. While Mr. Nakashima did not frown on the use of machinery, he did most of the delicate shaping and finishing by himself.

In 1952, he received the gold medal for craftsmanship of the American Institute of Architecture. The award, established in 1915, is the institute's highest honor for work in metals, masonry, textiles and other industrial arts. He was made a Fellow of the American Craft Council in 1979 and was the recipient of a Hazlett Award in 1981.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Nakashima is survived by a son, Kevin K., of New Hope; his daughter, now Mira Yarnall of New Hope, Pa.; one sister, Mary Hokari of Seattle, and four grandchildren.

A Mass will be held 11 A.M. tomorrow at St. Martin's Church in New Hope.

**APPENDIX B:
PHILOSOPHY -
GEORGE
NAKASHIMA,
WOODWORKERS**



"Instead of a long running and bloody battle with nature, to dominate her, we can walk in step with a tree to release the joy in her grains, to join with her to realize her potentials, to enhance the environment of man."

- George Nakashima

RESOURCES:

Book:

[The Soul of a Tree: A Master Woodworkers Reflections: George Nakashima: 8601423281629:Amazon.com: Books](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000APR004)

[Hannah Martin, Architectural Digest, 14, Oct. 2020. This article also references another documentary](#)

[A Look at George Nakashima's Instinctual Woodworking | Architectural Digest](#)

[A Look at the Life of America's Most Important Contemporary Woodworker | Architectural Digest](#)

[John Nakashima, \(nephew of George\), 2020 video trailer](#)

[Watch George Nakashima, Woodworker - The definitive documentary Online | Vimeo On Demand on Vimeo](#)

[Nakashima Foundation: For more information on Nakashima's philosophy Manifesto | Nakashima Foundation for Peace](#)

[Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Renwick Gallery](#)

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/george-nakashima-5896>

[George Nakashima Obituary, New York Times, June 18, 1990.](#)

[George Nakashima Is Dead at 85; Designer and Master Woodworker - The New York Times](#)

[\(Clear text available through link above\)](#)



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