



When he was visiting Mexico 30 years ago, Toshiyuki Kita had an eerie premonition of Japan's destruction. An exhibition of Inca culture said to him, "Here, if nothing is done, lies Japan—extinct and in museums." Kita is doing as much as he possibly can, but he still thinks Japan is "extinguishing" itself, because ever since the end of the War, her people have striven to become Western. They have treated thousands of years of history as a curiosity unrelated to them, losing the most important aspects of their culture. Soetsu Yanagi, who founded Japan's Arts and Crafts movement in the 1920s, wrote, "Western knowledge has proven a blessing in terms of volume, but it has incurred an immense loss in terms of quality. When quality is lost, all is lost." When he's disheartened, Kita feels that, "Japan is breathing its last, because people believe that there is something better over there. They will sail away. And when they come full circle, back to Japan, it will be gone." Sadly, among the general public, an incomplete understanding of things Western has supplanted a once-complete familiarity with things Japanese. This daunts Kita both coming and going. Most Japanese can't accept his innovative forms for lacquer and paper objects, nor can they recognize the Japanese values behind his "Western" furniture. In other words, they can't see how lacquer could be made international, or how furniture—a Western concept—could be made Japanese.

At bottom, however, Kita is a conscientious and determined optimist. To help create a new Japanese aesthetic, over the past three decades Kita has visited craftspeople in the tiny isolated villages of Japan, designed pieces for them to produce that are viable in an international market, and learned a foreign language and culture in order to sell them. As incomprehensible as this may seem, foreign success stimulates the domestic Japanese market because Japan is in thrall to the West. Kita has had great success overseas in Italy, where he has worked since 1975, first selling luminaries and tableware, and then producing and selling furniture. His entire effort has been motivated by the desire to eventually bring the priceless fruits of the craftsmen's labor back to Japan. It's a roundabout route, but the only one that might entice Japanese to fully appreciate their own inimitable culture. After almost 30 years, the Japanese market is finally responding to what was always theirs.

Kita's cherished favorites among Japanese crafts are *washi* (Japanese paper) and *urushi* (lacquer). In his book *Washi and Urushi, Reinterpretation of Tradition*, (Rikuyosha, Tokyo, 1999) Kita introduces the individual craftspeople whom his international enterprise has helped to keep working and tells the story of his long love affair with these materials and the craft tradition they uphold. Washi was once produced all over Japan, and used for everything from rain-wear and summer clothing to lanterns and disposable pans. Similar to the lacquerware business, in papermaking, mechanized mass-production and the emergence of wholesalers ruptured the line of communication from customer to retailer to craftsman, communication that had, for centuries, been critical in initiating new designs. This disjunction isolated the traditional craftspeople and froze the forms in time. As a result, paper and lacquer were relegated to a special, lonely cubicle in Japanese life, a kind of solitary confinement before death. Kita reintroduces active design to the chain, while upholding processes that crystallize the wisdom of generation upon generation of craftspeople whose main concerns have been the utility and beauty of their wares.

Kita's *washi* lamps are useful and unpretentious, rescuing at least the handful of pieces he has produced, in Italy, from a hopeless death-row environment. *Tako* (Kite) has a playful touch; the cord looks like a kite string. *Kyo*, however delicately detailed in various shade papers, can be suspended anywhere by its utilitarian, hanger-like hook. Even the bamboo basket lamps are modestly styled, more like practical hampers or colanders than precious artifacts.

"Lacquer," Kita says, "is a mass of time, and lacquer pieces are like floppy disks entrusted to us by our ancestors." A century ago, Japanese parties were a collection of guests seated singly on square *zabuton* cushions and served tiny portions in lacquered dishes on individual lacquered trays. Now Japanese party like Westerners do, serving themselves from large, common dishes laid out on grand

tables. To Western eyes, Kita's lacquer tableware may look Japanese, but the pieces are unconventionally sized and shaped. They suit the new lifestyle of the stylish few that recognize their beauty and can accept their novelty.

Furniture in Japan is minimal, portable, and kept out of sight. This effectively displays the details of the conventional modular aesthetic: cloth-bordered woven tatami mats, the wooden grids of sliding shoji windows, fusuma doors covered with decorative papers and used to divide great rooms into several smaller rooms by sliding on runners set flush to the tatami, and the tokonoma—an asymmetrically divided formal space for flower arrangements and hanging scrolls. Like all Japanese his age, Kita grew up with little exposure to Western furniture. His family owned a sofa but denied all but its formal utility; it was for guests, and was kept in the parlor. His only memory of familiar, useful furniture was the *chabudai*, a table about 36 inches square and 18 inches high that when not in use stood against a wall, its legs folded beneath its body.

Unfortunately, since the end of the war, anyone wealthy enough to do so has made a confused attempt at imitating Western interiors. It's now popular to replace the demure *chabudai* with a massive urethaned wooden slab of a kitchen table, and the stack of movable *zabuton* with clunky "Americana" chairs, or, in the family room, with a decidedly immovable and humorless sofa upholstered in some conventionally dull polyester.

The furniture Kita produces in Italy is playful and colorful, and not quite Japanese to Western eyes, but it recalls the very sense of interaction Kita grew accustomed to as a child. Kita recalls it as a time when there was inter-generational communication, too, which has since disappeared, making our historical position less obvious than ever before. In city neighborhoods, crowded with wooden houses, kids freely joined other families for dinner and played late into the summer nights. The family rooms were inviting, and opened into the alley. In a corner there would be a pile of *zabuton*, with which kids could build a soft and modular fort. Kita's *Saruyama* (monkey mountain) is that playground; a couple of people can sit or lie on it any way they like. *Wink* is a multi-colored moveable womb of a recliner. The chairs *aki*, *biki*, *canta*, *dodo*, (ABC in Italian, plus a dodo bird!) are physical puns: they look like the letters and the bird. Many of these pieces were devised decades ago and have been produced and sold in Italy since the early 1990s, but only recently have they been sold in Japan; they are too colorful for the taste of the average Japanese, and more fun than the postwar Japanese market knows what to do with. If individuals who make up this market only looked beneath the surface, they would certainly recognize the Japanese origin of the concept.

In 2000 and 2001, Kita completed two versions of an LCD television for Sharp, corporate sponsor of his extensive exhibition in April 2001 in Milan, *l'anima del design*. At first the design of high-tech entertainment equipment seemed to me an impossible departure or a sell-out. However, I recalled his 1986 entries for an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou with the theme "Space for the Future." One was a Zen-like environment inviting meditation, a space for the mind whose physical form was simple: a cube of empty space bounded by supports of lacquered wood and floored with two tatami mats. The other was appointed with Kita's AQUOS TV, whose electronically manipulated colors and scenes from nature, such as images of swimming carp, depended on an external power source. It was framed in aluminum, copper, and iron. "If you were to pull the plug," Kita noted, "it would disappear, leaving only a cold, mineral shell." It would also leave one with what the first space provided: consciousness of time and our place in it. The internal space, represented by the tatami-floored cube, never changes. "A hundred years ago, tomorrow, a hundred years from now," says Kita, "it is the same. When we die, we may die in that internal space, but in order to live, if we control things with high technology, there may be a little of our natural environment left for us tomorrow." Currently, we must maintain an ideal balance between the historically unchanging inner world and the externally manipulated outer world. Toshiyuki Kita's design is an expression of that balance.



Credits & Comments

Pg. 88 Portrait of Toshiyuki Kita by Maurizio Marcato.

Pg. 91 Exhibit L'Anima Del Design, Milan, 2001. Photographer: Maurizio Marcato.

Pg. 92 Gold & Titanium Glasses, 1994. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Luigi Sciuccati, Client/Manufacturer: Miz (Japan).

Frames for eyeglasses made of 18k gold and titanium. They are lightweight and coated for those with allergies to metal. These frames were designed with the idea that Japanese companies could enter the international marketplace with their own brands.

Pg. 93 Two Points Watch, 1991. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Luigi Sciuccati, Client/Manufacturer: Miz (Japan); Permanent Collections of The Museum Of Modern Art, Saint-Etienne, France.

The faces were colored in black and white separately. It allows to recognize two different times quickly. The organic form is comfortable on your arm and does not feel unwieldy or out of place.

Pg. 94 Eterra, 1989. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Maurizio Marcato, Client/Manufacturer: Idk (Japan).

Simplicity of forms and beauty into everyday design. The outside expresses the roughness and naturalness of the earth, while the inside's pure white glaze enhances the beauty of foods and drinks and also makes the pottery easy to wash.

Pg. 95 Pepe-Mellina, 1995. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Unclear, Client/Manufacturer: Kokusai-Kakou (Japan).

These plates have a built-in glass holder, so you can hold your food and drink in one hand. Convenient for parties, stand-up buffets and outdoor dinners, stackable and available in 5 colors to coordinate with your interior decor.

Pg. 96 Pewter Pot, 1994

Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Luigi Sciuccati, Client/Manufacturer: Mariage Frères (France).

Recalling the popular tin works of a bygone era in Osaka, these contemporary revivals are a living memorial which focus on the ceremony of "tea". Tin, with its low melting point, is easily shaped and is a recyclable material.

Pg. 97 Wajima, 1986. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Nob Fukuda, Client/Manufacturer: Ohmukai-Koshudo (Japan).

The design of tableware was made with respect to the traditional craft, material and craftsman's technique. These objects are widely suitable for our modern life.

Pg. 98 Aquos Wide 28" Lcd Tv, 2000. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Luigi Sciuccati, Client/Manufacturer: Sharp (Japan). Permanent collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

The world's first 28-inch wide LCD TV is supported by a boomerang-shaped leg. The TV's frame is made of aluminum. The revolutionary placed speakers produce very high quality sound.

Pg. 99 Wink, 1980. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Luigi Sciuccati, Client/Manufacturer: Cassina (Italy). Permanent collections of The Museum Of Modern Art, New York; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Vitra Design Museum, Weil Am Rhein, Germany Museum Fur Kunst Und Gewerbe, Hamburg.

The back can be adjusted to any angle, the head rest supports the head and can be bent backward if necessary. The legs can be extended forward to support the whole body. The covering is easily removed for cleaning. From a mischievous impression, I

called it "Wink".

Pg. 100 Hop, 1989. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Gabriele Basilico, Client/Manufacturer: Wittmann (Austria).

Organically-shaped chair which looks ready to embrace people softly. The black leather armrests are also a nice accent. There are two styles of leg: diecast aluminum or leather-covered. The name Hop is derived from the form of the chair, which looks as if it's ready to hop.

Pg. 101 Beo, 1985. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Zen Yamamura, Client/Manufacturer: Interprofil (Germany).

This versatile piece can be used in many ways: as a sofa, as a chaise longue, or as a bed. Adjustments are made with a gas cylinder built-in to the seat. The design was inspired by the idea that, placed where family members gather, it can be used individually however if one wants to use it. Easy to move on casters.

Pg. 102 Wink, 1980. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Mario Carrieri, Client/Manufacturer: Cassina (Italy).

Pg. 103 Aki, Biki, Canta, 1996. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Client/Manufacturer: Cassina (Italy). Permanent Collections Of The Museum Of Modern Art, Saint-Etienne, France.

This chair was designed to be used with a computer. It rotates through a full 360 degrees. Three designs are available: with or without arms and with an arm that swivels to become a headrest. This series was designed especially for our modern computer-oriented society and also with our aging society in mind.

Pg. 104 Mirai / Sora, Toki, Yume, 1989. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Vincenzo Castella, Client/Manufacturer: Casas (Spain)

Permanent Collections Of The Museum Of Modern Art, Saint-Etienne, France.

It is constructed in four parts, the back, the seat, the front legs and the back legs. There is a choice of three types for the back part. These chairs are stackable. Awarded "Delta De Oro" in Spain (1990).

Pg. 105 Dolphin, 1992. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Mitsumasa Fujitsuka, Client/Manufacturer: Toto (Japan).

Made of aluminum and designed both functionally and compactly, this all in one solo unit is easy to set up and install anywhere.

Pg. 106 Tako, 1971. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Shinya Yamaguchi, Client/Manufacturer: Iguzzini (Italy). Permanent Collections Of The Museum Of Modern Art, Saint-Etienne, France.

Wall lighting equipment made from hand-made Japanese paper, assembled and then packaged in a compact case. Traditional and beautiful Japanese paper (re)introduced into our modern life.

Pg. 107 Beppu Lamp, 1991. Designer: Toshiyuki Kita, Photographer: Shinya Yamaguchi, Client/Manufacturer: Idk (Japan).

The lamp use bamboo material produced at Beppu, Oita (Japan), in combination with hand-made Japanese paper. These were finished according to the traditional process of highly skilled craftsmen.



























