

## Rio Kobayashi



Rio Kobayashi, photography by Irene Yamaguchi.

**Rio Kobayashi is a London-based designer and maker whose practice weaves conceptual curiosity with an enduring commitment to craftsmanship. Born in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan, into a family of ceramic artisans, Kobayashi created his first piece of furniture at a young age. At eighteen, he relocated to Austria, where he undertook a rigorous three-year apprenticeship in cabinetmaking, laying the technical foundation for a distinctive, cross-cultural design language.**

**From 2011 onward, Kobayashi deepened his perspective through collaborations with artists and studios in Berlin, Milan, Tokyo, and Paris. In 2017, he established his own workshop in East London, where his work continues to evolve through a synthesis of material exploration, narrative, and form. His practice has been showcased at the London Design Festival, Milan Design Week, and in numerous gallery settings, and has been profiled by The Financial Times, Wallpaper, The World of Interiors, Forbes, among other international publications.**

**Spanning furniture, interiors, and sculptural objects, Kobayashi's work is diverse in scope yet precise in execution. Each piece proposes a conversation—between heritage and innovation, restraint and play—rooted in the traditions of Japanese craft and animated by the fluid possibilities of contemporary design.**

**LUCIJA ŠUTEJ: When I was researching your work, I noticed that you come from a family of makers - focused towards frescoes, pottery and woodworking. How did your upbringing shape your approach to materials? Are any of your other siblings designers?**



RIO KOBAYASHI: Yes (laughs). I grew up in a countryside house in Japan, north of Tokyo - in the middle of a forest. The place is called Mashiko, famous for pottery because of Shoji Hamada.

LŠ: Of The Mingei Art Movement?

RK: Exactly (laughs). He settled there and elevated it into a major pottery town. When I was about six or seven years old, my parents found another plot of land, circa 15 minutes north called Ichikai. They started building their own houses - first a house/studio for my father's ceramics then a main house next to it. I remember helping them build, even hammering nails into the roof. Actually, my mother told me I could hammer nails before I could walk. (laughs)



The designer in Japan

They would let me do many things around the house and they traveled extensively - my mother is Austrian-Italian, my father Japanese. They met while backpacking in Europe and India, then moved to Japan. My mother specialized in church refurbishment (conservation and gilding master) and my father trained as a chef (then retrained as Sherpa) but later turned towards pottery.

LŠ: Your parents have an incredible life.

RK: Yes, much more interesting than mine! (laughs) They met three times by accident - the last time in Goa, India. My mother would eventually move to Japan. Making things was always part of life. If I wanted something, my father would say "Make it yourself." (laughs) One of my sisters makes shoes and another brother studied architecture, and makes wooden objects - spatulas, plates, and houses, really interesting pieces!

LŠ: Did you ever collaborate or thought of creating a project on pottery with your father?

RK: Not yet. I avoided his field growing up - didn't want to be "the potter's son." Recently I asked for advice and he said: "Watch YouTube." (laughs)

LŠ: What was the first piece of furniture you made?

RK: A simple white-painted wooden shelf in my room. I don't remember how old I was. But I remember the fun I had picking material.

LŠ: Which woodworking techniques did you learn first and which ones - if any do you still find the hardest today and why?

RK: When I did my apprenticeship, I learned how to make traditional dovetail joints that connect two pieces of wood without using glue. You have to work very precisely, and I remember mine didn't fit right away—I was really disappointed. But my master gave it a firm push, and it went in perfectly tight. He was very happy, and eventually, I was too.

LŠ: Are there specific materials that you always felt resonated with your work the most - why?

RK: It changes from time to time, however right now I'm drawn towards cherry wood. I love how precise you can work with it and how smooth the surface becomes. I also really like how the colour develops a darker patina over time—that transformation is something I find very beautiful.

LŠ: Growing up in Mashiko - did the Mingei philosophy influence your design approach?

RK: I only realized Mingei's significance on the local creativity later. Mashiko is a community of makers - craftspeople everywhere with large pottery markets taking place twice or three times per year. I think that the environment was more formative than the movement itself. My parents' close friends were Jiro and Yoiki Hazama, glassblowers - their kiln was shaped like a demon. He had many hobbies like fishing and I wanted to be like him. The only glass piece I made to date is a mirror, produced with a Venetian glass company and it is one of my earliest dreams to come true.

LŠ: Your upbringing sounds remarkable! - forests and self-sufficiency.

RK: Completely! My mother now grows over 60 vegetables and makes pickles. Money feels irrelevant there - the nearest convenience store is 30 minutes away by car. (laughs)

LŠ: You moved from Japan to Austria at 18 years old. How did your new environment shape your work and design philosophy? Which apprenticeships or influence of local design studios- were particularly formative for you and why?

RK: Yes, after a rebellious school phase I told teachers I was moving to Austria. (laughs) I stayed with my grandmother in Tyrol and did a formative furniture-making apprenticeship, Wetscher. I learned traditional techniques like dovetail joints, different approaches to wood treatment, etc.

LŠ: Which woodworking techniques are becoming lost to future generations in your opinion?

RK: Sadly, dovetails are now mostly for show and the deeper understanding of wood grain is disappearing. After finishing my apprenticeship we had a final exam, where we would create pieces. I remember everyone was turning towards super traditional region-inspired pieces. They had a certain character but I wanted to approach it differently. I made a high counter with three drawers standing on black oak legs. Very simple design with hidden joints. At the time I thought it was cool, though looking back I'm not sure why I chose that exact design.

In Innsbruck, there was a design studio called Pudelskern, and I literally cycled past their office every day on the way to the woodworking studio. One day I asked if they needed help. At first they said no, but as they got busier with orders they called me back. Funny thing and probably what shaped my design approach the most is that I didn't know any 3D design programs back then. I could only build things physically. They took a chance on me and I spent evenings and

weekends learning the software at their studio. That's really how I transitioned from just making things to actually designing them. (laughs)

LŠ: You spent your career living in different centres across Austria to Berlin, Paris and now London. How did the local design communities expand your work?

RK: I decided to move to Berlin after the studio dissolved. I decided to start fresh and hitchhiked to Berlin. This was back in 2013 - such an exciting scene for someone in their mid-20s. I am thinking of the energy, the parties, ...Through a friend's introduction I ended up setting up a workshop in a shared space in Kreuzberg - there were four woodworkers sharing this huge facility. For nearly three years, I mostly built other people's designs.

Showing my own work was terrifying at first - it felt too personal. Putting a piece of myself out there to be judged. (laughs) But the workshop environment was amazing - really supportive people with great equipment.

And moving to Paris was to work on shows at Palais de Tokyo and collaborating with artists like Taro Izumi. We worked on different wood and metal sculptures and this experience completely changed how I think about materials now. I really appreciated working with international craftsmen with different approaches.

LŠ: When did you decide to open your own place and why did you think London was the best venue?

RK: It was actually my former mentor, Georg Oehler, from Austria who encouraged me to start exhibiting my own work. I was accepted into the London Design Fair but nearly withdrew - intimidated by putting my work out there publicly. My Mikado collection received positive attention - many visitors immediately made the connection to the classic children's game, sitting on the chairs and engaging. I operated my own studio in Leyton where we'd often salvage interesting wood materials from the streets. (laughs) That entire neighborhood has become such a vibrant hub for small-scale creative workshops.



*Mikado series, 2017. Photography by James Harris.*













LŠ: Yes, and I also like small pop - up galleries and shops like Host of Leyton. I wanted to stop at a specific work, *The Nancy Table*, that re-purposed archival personal objects and was presented in the exhibition *R for Repair* at the V&A Museum in London.

RK: This wonderful project began during the pandemic when a friend asked me to repair a damaged Thonet chair. I ended up completely reimagining it with bold new colors and forms. (laughs) This led to my involvement in the *R for Repair* exhibition, where I restored a 19 th-century sewing box.

The owner of the box inherited it from her grandmother, where she found all these paintings. Discovering that the owner's grandmother had been an aspiring artist through conversations, I designed a table that incorporated her paintings under glass - transforming this piece into a centerpiece that showed her artistic work. While her granddaughter now works as a curator, living the creative life as a woman was difficult for grandmother in those times.

Hearing all these stories and seeing a photo of her grandmother standing in the middle, surrounded by her family stuck with me. So I created a table that would be a centrepiece, a place where everything happens - from breakfast to work, together.

LŠ: Do you plan on any artists' collaborations?

RK: I would love to. Also, I really like the idea of making a piece for an artist - to think how they would use the object and introduce it into their life. It would be great to exchange works like postcards (laughs)-good for creativity! The piece, Chariotte Periond Shelf, came out of my friend needing shelves for his house. Playing around with different colours, patterns and with seamless joints, I looked to make simple connections. It's kind of a rip-off of Charlotte Perriand, but I thought, maybe I can add "Rio" into it, to make it more fun. (laugh)



*Nancy Table*, 2022. Photography by James Harris









LŠ: What about her work spoke to you?

RK: She has incredible ability to work and play around with simple and calm shapes. And then through the smallest of details completely shifting the whole perspective of a piece. And I always think of her being a female artist in the pre-war period of Japan. How did she even do all that? Pretty badass! (laughs)

LŠ: During the last London Design Festival you presented a pavilion. Are you planning any more architectural interventions?

RK: It was kind of a stretch for me. But being so long impressed by the Serpentine Pavilions, I wanted to play with size in my designs. I am not an artist or an architect, so I didn't know if I could ever be part of that type of a project. So, I decided to just start saying it out loud to everyone: I want to do a pavilion. For half a year! (laughs)

And then someone actually came back to me with a project and it was difficult with so many layers from budget limitations, public safety, fire hazards. I rethought the whole design several times due to limitations and it ended up being this mix of my Japanese heritage—growing up in a wooden countryside house—and Austrian influences, like the Secession movement.

LŠ: What are you currently working on?

RK: A few things! There is an interior design project in Amsterdam for musician Tomo Katsurada—from a Japanese psychedelic rock group Kikagaku Moyo. His shop, Future Days, is already open, but I'm designing a back room for recording and podcasts. It is going to be super vibrant with chaotic energy.

And I have a few upcoming shows, one is transforming broken furniture into new objects and another one is the October two-person show (Mark Caulfield Moore) with Kate McGarry Gallery at Frieze.



*Off The Shelf*, Photography by Christian Cassel









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