

MADE IN JAPAN

100 NEW PRODUCTS



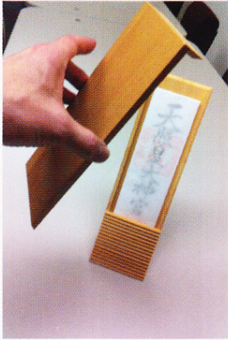
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NAOMI POLLOCK
FOREWORD BY REIKO SUDO

ALTAR FOR ONE GOD

Toshihiko Sakai // Sakai Design Associate

2010



In Japan, where most of the population follows a combination of Shinto and Buddhist belief systems, *kamidana* (small altars for home use, dedicated to one or more Shinto gods) are common fixtures in living rooms nationwide. Perched on a sideboard, shelf or other high place, the traditional *kamidana* resembles a miniature shrine building, complete with steps, doors and a pitched roof. Designed to blend comfortably with contemporary aesthetics, Toshihiko Sakai's *Altar for One God* evokes this traditional spirit but in a highly abstract way.

Sakai's project began with a cold call from a salesman in Yamanashi Prefecture who deals in prefabricated 'house-maker' houses, as they are known in Japan (built by corporate companies rather than conventional carpenters). When his customers moved into their brand-new abodes, many of them wanted an altar to match but were unable to find suitable options at their local Shinto supply shops. Taking a leap of faith, he commissioned Sakai, who earns his living brainstorming about futuristic, 'advanced design' for large electronics firms.

'My basic concept was "don't do too much"', says Sakai. 'I did not want it to look

modern at all.' And yet his altar had to meld with today's domestic interiors – a far cry from the wood-and-paper houses typical of the Edo Period (1603–1868), when *kamidana* first gained popularity.

Bowing politely to its antecedents, Sakai's *kamidana* is the product of a skilled woodworker in Nagano Prefecture, who crafts each altar from cypress wood, the traditional *kamidana* material. A plain, upright 29-cm-high (11½ in.) box with a shelf in front, Sakai's version references the rectilinear lines of the historic buildings that once served as models for *kamidana*. Like its precedents, it holds an *ofuda*, a small wooden plaque bought from the neighbourhood shrine (see left).

'We pray every morning to this board, which is connected to the shrine, which is connected to the gods', explains Sakai. 'It is kind of like a mobile phone.' The daily ritual also includes offering sustenance to the gods. Placed on the shelf are small ceramic plates made on the island of Kyushu (where many ceramics-makers are based), in which to put the traditional uncooked rice and salt, and glass beakers to hold sake and sprigs of *sakaki* (a species of camellia). The salt and *sakaki* are intended to ward off evil.



OISHI KITCHEN TABLE

Hisae Igarashi // Igarashi Design Studio

2005 // Fukuchi

Japan's plethora of architectural and interiors magazines might lead one to believe that the country's kitchens always look pristine, but they can be just as messy as kitchens might be anywhere else. 'Newspapers, snacks, games ... there is always something on the table', comments Tokyo-based interior and product designer Hisae Igarashi. Hoping to resolve this problem, Igarashi created a table that practically tidies itself. Instead of one tabletop, it has two; together they sandwich a slot of space in which the flotsam and jetsam of daily life can be stowed in less time than it takes to make a cup of instant ramen noodles.

The table is part of the Oishi ('delicious') Kitchen project, a series of kitchen goods created by independent designers for factories based in Fukui Prefecture. Igarashi was invited to participate by the 'design producer' (see page 20) Toshihiko Sakai, who organized the project. While the theme of quick cleaning was a given, the table's form was Igarashi's unique interpretation.

The table comes in three different shapes in order to fit various room sizes and family configurations. The largest table measures

1.8 m in length (a little under 6 ft) and has an organic form reminiscent of a grand piano (see opposite); while its straight side can align with the wall, its curvy side faces the room's open space. 'People can gather here easily since there are no corners', explains Igarashi. Indeed, while the table comfortably accommodates six people, its wide end is spacious enough for a parent and child to sit together and do homework, whereas its narrow end is ideal for a solo tea drinker.

Igarashi looked closely at the table's impact on its surrounding space. 'Most Japanese rooms are rectangular,' she says, 'but a rounded table can change their character.' A commanding presence in a room of any shape or size, the table has a very solid appearance. Yet beneath its veneer of Japanese ash is a core of paulownia wood, a strong but lightweight material long used in Japan for furniture-making. Two pairs of sturdy L-shaped boards support the top layers. Once belongings have been tucked away in the space between the two tabletops, they may never budge again, but a tidy, inviting table is surely worth that risk.



SPIN Flask

2005 // Yamauchi Spring

Delicate and ethereal, the *Spin* is barely a basket, let alone a fruit bowl, and yet the coil of impossibly thin steel wire is capable of supporting any fruit, from plums to pineapples. Designed by the Flask partnership (now dissolved), the *Spin* puts bounce into the industrial products made by Yamauchi Spring.

The Fukui Prefecture company has manufactured springs of all sizes since 1947, but had never before worked with an outside product designer. Its collaboration with the avant-garde Tokyo-based designers started after the local government consulted the product designer Toshihiko Sakai (see page 36) about ways in which to support the area's industries. 'They believed that good design would yield good sales', explains Sakai, who agreed to pair local businesses with innovative product designers.

Flask's partners, Naoko Matsumoto and Ryuichi Sato, were new to the world of spring-making, so they began by visiting Yamauchi's factory to familiarize themselves with the company's products and manufacturing capabilities. 'We wanted to use Yamauchi's existing technology', says Matsumoto, who

favoured this cost-conscious strategy. But Flask also wanted to use springs to make something new and exciting.

A fruit bowl fitted the bill. Essentially a single spring, the *Spin* consists of a 7-m-long (nearly 22 ft) wire that spirals round a thick central steel ring. Small slits in the ring hook the wire into place, eliminating the need for expensive welding, while a tiny spring normally used in eyewear frames joins the ends of the wire, turning it into a continuous loop. 'It looks a little like a bicycle wheel', comments Matsumoto. The tray-like form consists of twenty-seven wedge-shaped loops that radiate from the centre ring. While the loops' inward slant keeps fruit from sliding off, their assembly allows air to circulate freely among the apples, bananas and oranges. 'We wanted the image of fruit floating on a plate', says Matsumoto.

Minimalist yet mighty, the *Spin* can comfortably hold eight to ten fruit. 'That's the usual amount you would put on a table', according to Matsumoto. But even the heaviest fruit look as if they are supported purely by air.

