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How Designer Shiro Kuramata Helped Change Views of Japan

Shiro Kuramata went to great lengths to create works of simple beauty and elegance

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Shiro Kuramata with Furniture in Irregular Forms, 1970

When Zeev Aram staged his first exhibition of the work of designer Shiro Kuramata, more than 30 years ago, Japan was still seen as a mysterious place. It was understood, much like China was until recently, as a country of copyists and low-cost production. At the time Kuramata was a complete unknown, and the exhibition was a revelation: Japan was a place that was capable of leading new ideas on design and not just a follower.

Twenty years after Kuramata's death, Aram is restaging that exhibition in central London. Kuramata is now one of a handful of 20th-century designers – alongside Carlo Mollino, Eileen Gray and Jean Prouvé – whose exquisite furniture is sought after by collectors around the world.

His Miss Blanche chair – named after Tennessee Williams’ character Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* – goes for six figures at auctions.

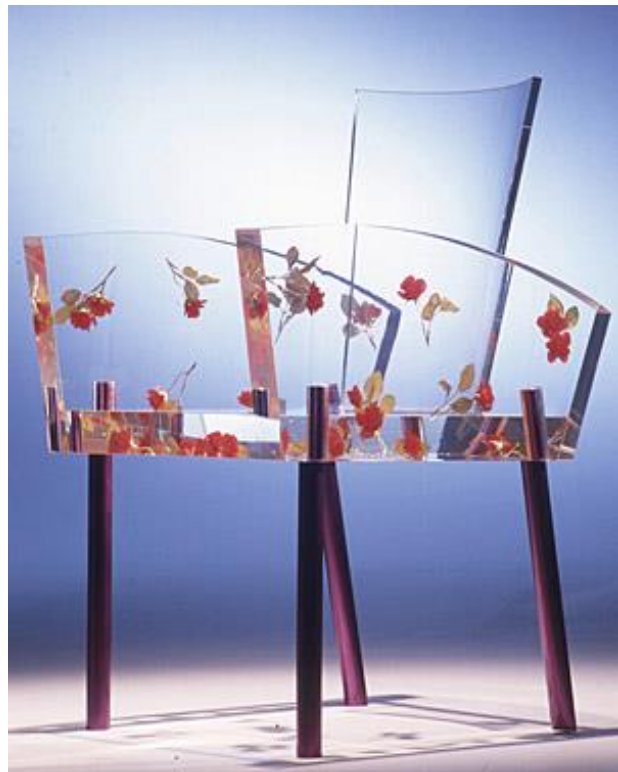
Along with fashion designer and friend Issey Miyake, architects Arata Isozaki and Tadao Ando, and film-maker Akira Kurosawa, Kuramata belonged to the remarkable generation of talented young Japanese who transformed the way that Japan was viewed by the world. All of them were born just before the outbreak of the second world war and grew up under the grip of an authoritarian militarist dictatorship that demanded obedience and conformity.

After the war, their generation was the first to come to maturity with a chance to express itself. Kuramata’s work was clearly modern in the way that it used materials, and specifically Japanese in its simplicity and elegance. Yet Kuramata was always prepared to experiment. He explored the potential of commonly-used materials as if they were precious, using humble acrylic or chipboard, or the kind of steel mesh used to reinforce plaster.

Despite the regularity with which Kuramata was described as a minimalist, he was able to work with strong colour, bold forms and even decorative and figurative elements. He continually found ways to explore the tension between surface and transparency and to deny the materiality of objects and spaces.



Flower Vase, 1989



Miss Blanche Chair, 1988

As he became better known, Ettore Sottsass asked him to work with the Memphis group at the end of the 1980s. Kuramata came up with a table made from concrete, with broken shards of glass added to the mix.

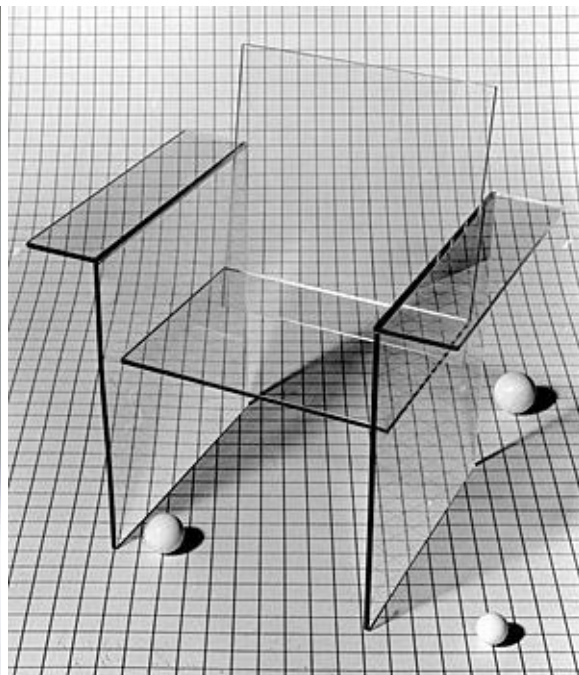
Kuramata designed sushi restaurants in Tokyo remarkable enough to prompt British collector Richard Schlagman to preserve at least one of his interiors, taking the unusual step of acquiring not just the furniture and fittings but the whole thing.

Of his architectural work, there is very little left. A freestanding staircase in the open courtyard of the Axis building in Tokyo, built in 1982, rises up through a grey void as if it were a piece of sculpture in space, sheathed in a cloudy curtain of curved etched glass. When I was researching my monograph on Kuramata, I went to one of the few surviving Kuramata interiors, a tiny sushi restaurant by the name of Ume-no-ki, which is still run by the same chef who commissioned the design in 1978. Although the restaurant is only large enough to take 12 people, it is one of the most powerful architectural spaces I have seen. Issey Miyake also maintained the first shop that Kuramata designed for him, in Tokyo, for as long as he could in tribute to his friend.

And it was Kuramata who persuaded Englishman John Pawson to become an architect. Pawson was determined to meet Kuramata after reading a magazine article on his work. He spent several months in Japan, hanging around in Kuramata's studio or, as he puts it, trying not to get in the way. When Pawson returned to London and designed his first flat in a stucco-fronted Victorian terrace, he telephoned Kuramata for advice on which particular shade of violet to paint the cornice.



Sedia seduta, 1984



Glass Chair, 1976

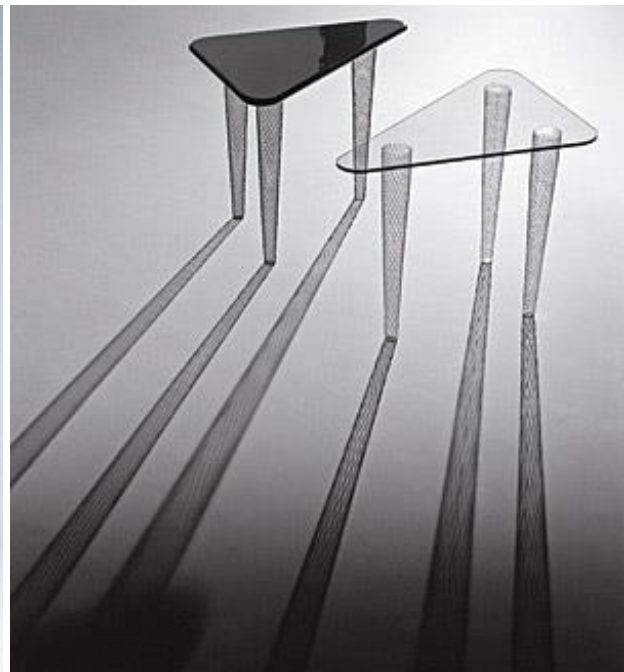
In terms of sheer beauty, few, if any, designers can match Kuramata. The objects that he produced in his short career before he died at the tragically early age of 56 include vases made from coloursaturated pink and orange acrylic that turned function into an optical illusion; metal mesh chairs that left their mark on bare flesh; clocks that measured time with feathers and twigs for hands, which were extraordinarily sensuous, inventive and even poetic.

Kuramata took design to extremes. For one project he wrapped a traditional bentwood chair with wire, and set fire to it – not an easy task. The resulting design was a burnt-out ghost of a chair with a metal mesh frame. He also made a chair, entirely out of glass with no visible joints, using invisible glue.

Perhaps the most exquisite of all of Kuramata’s designs is the Miss Blanche chair that he made in 1988.



Revolving Cabinet, 1970



Twilight Time, 1985

It is the quintessentially minimal chair: a seat and back made of clear acrylic, supported by anodised aluminium legs. The acrylic is almost invisible, existing only as the atmosphere in which a tumbling cascade of roses can survive, weightless and apparently effortlessly. Producing the chair, however, was the exact opposite of effortless. The primary ingredient is acrylic resin, a material that comes in liquid form in four gallon drums. Kuramata’s team of craftsmen made a mould for the liquid in order to transform it into a usable solid sheet. Liquid acrylic is like water, and needs the addition of just the right amount of hardening agent, a procedure that requires considerable skill. If there is too much hardener, the acrylic goes cloudy and opaque as it solidifies. Working by trial and error, Kuramata’s team found a method of pouring acrylic to half

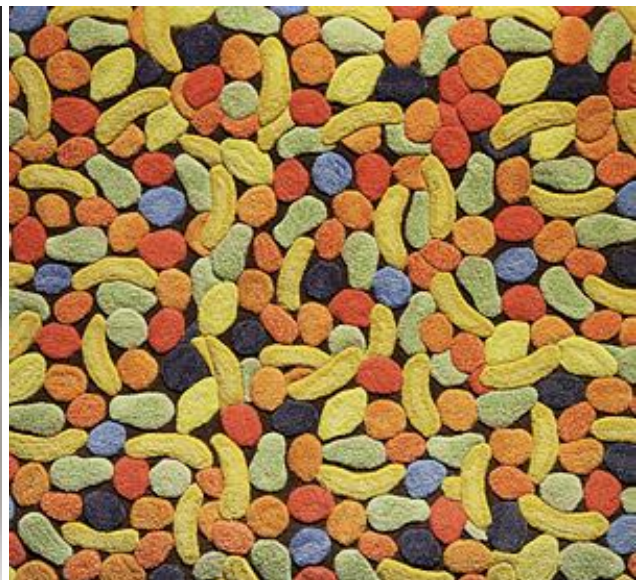
the depth of the mould, putting in the flowers, waiting eight hours for the acrylic to harden and then pouring in the rest to the top of the mould.

Apart from achieving the right degree of transparency, Kuramata's key concern was making sure the roses looked right. The first idea was to use real roses, but the acrylic just burnt fresh flowers, and turned them black. Then he tried the most expensive artificial flowers he could find. But that didn't work either. Expensive flowers were made with a dye that tended to bleed into the acrylic, leaving a permanent stain. Finally they tried the cheapest artificial flowers, which was the right solution. The first batch of rose-studded acrylic sheets yielded just eight usable chairs, with one failure. The edition was extended to 56, reflecting Kuramata's age at the time of his death.

At the original exhibition Kuramata and his craftsman came to London to supervise the installation. The pieces on show this time, including Kuramata's sinuous white cabinets, and his glass chairs, belong to Aram's personal collection.



Kyoto, 1983



Detail of Panacee rug, 1989