

Made in Japan /// Spoke Chair



An oval upholstered seat backed by wooden rods, the Spoke Chair is an elegant blend of East and West. Its generous cushion is broad enough for sitting cross-legged as if on tatami mats, yet the curved back evokes the spirit of an English Windsor chair. Designed by Katsuhei Toyoguchi (1905–1991) for the

Yamagata Prefecture-based furniture manufacturer Tendo Mokko, the chair debuted in 1963. Yet its classic good looks and superb construction have kept it in production to this day.

A pioneer of modern Japanese design, Toyoguchi was one of several local furniture designers who promoted Western-style living after World War II. He practiced what he preached as well, developing the Spoke Chair for his own use. As he got on in years, Toyoguchi found it difficult to stand up after sitting on tatami mats, but none of the chairs on the market were big enough to accommodate a similar seated posture. Tendo Mokko, which had been enlisted to build furniture for the US Army during the occupation, agreed to make Toyoguchi's hybrid chair.

Possessing a strong Japanese sensibility, the chair consists of a round base that stands on four low legs

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and supports 15 spokes, arranged radially like a traditional umbrella. Concealed by a colorful cushion, the base is actually a solid frame made of laminated, 1-millimeter-thick sheets of beechwood pressed together and shaped with a mold. "When bending wood, beech is best," explains Tendo Mokko's Shinya Saito.

The most challenging part of the construction is joining the frame's two ends, which are cut and glued at an angle for a seamless connection. A final layer of blonde oak unites the base with the other wood parts. The result is a seat that combines the sensation of sitting on the floor with the ease of sitting on a chair.

Tokyo-based American architect Naomi Pollock writes on Japanese design for the Financial Times, Wallpaper and Architectural Record. Her books include Modern Japanese House and Made in Japan: 100 New Products