

Come in and take a seat

Asahikawa

Preface

Noritsugu Oda's house in Hokkaido is like a museum of the best mid-century design, except these exhibits are to be used, touched, sat on every day. And what he doesn't know about chairs is not worth knowing.

For a man who claims not to be a collector, Noritsugu Oda has one of the world's most remarkable assemblages of 20th-century chairs – 1,200 of them, over half of which are from Denmark. He also has a fine stash of 50 cabinets, 70 tables, 100 lighting fixtures, 3,500 pieces of pottery, and quantities of cutlery and glass. “I consider myself more of a researcher,” says Oda, a design professor who lives in the Hokkaido town of Asahikawa in the far north of Japan.

Professor Oda started accumulating 40 years ago, when he was working as a graphic designer in an Osaka department store. His first purchase was an LC4 chaise by Le Corbusier that cost nearly 10 times his monthly salary.

“At first, I just liked beautiful things,” he says, “but then it turned into a research project.” Fascinated by the design, construction and materials of Danish chairs he decided to write a book on the subject. “I thought it would take five years,” he says, laughing. “It took 17.” The book, *Denmaku no isu* (Danish Chairs), was finally published in 1996. It is a definitive work containing hundreds of detailed illustrations by Oda.

Oda is relaxed about his chairs and uses them every day. Nothing is off-limits, not even the two-seater Finn Juhl prototype that came from the

designer's house. “I mix them around,” he says. “I want to understand how they work.” The overspill is kept in a local warehouse.

Oda built up his collection on a modest income, simply through buying before designers hit the big time, scouring auction catalogues and getting to know dealers, particularly in Scandinavia, who could alert him to pieces he might like. There are 140 chairs by Hans Wegner alone, one of which was a gift from the designer.

Oda's favourite chair, a Finn Juhl 45, is a first generation version in rosewood that he bought 30 years ago. The same chair today would be a major investment. “It would be very difficult to build up this collection now,” he says. “I certainly couldn't afford to do it.”

Oda is lobbying for a design museum in Japan. “It's important for students to see properly made furniture,” he says. He is being courted by collectors and museums around the world, but for now he's holding out for something permanent at home. — (M)

