

Joint enterprise
Brazil

Preface

There's something to be said for a piece of furniture that has been thought through and laboured over by a master craftsman who puts quality before quantity. In rural Brazil, one Japanese emigré has perfected time-consuming joinery techniques to create exceptional objects.

Morito Ebine might have become a tailor. His father and grandfather were both tailors but the 45-year-old went into carpentry instead and moved from Japan to Brazil, where he's since plied his trade as one of the finest carpenters, not just in that country, but in the world. He's nothing if not humble about his occupation. "I never had any intention of working as a designer, not now or ever. I'm just a carpenter," he says.

But Ebine has a particular skill few carpenters possess, developed working at the Oak Village atelier in the Gifu prefecture of Japan: the laborious and ancient technique of mortise. It's a way of joining wood without screws, nails or even glue. Ebine also cites master woodworkers Wharton Esherick and John Makepeace as influences on his particular approach.

Born in Tochigi, north of Tokyo, Ebine arrived in Brazil in 1995, following his Brazilian wife. He worked growing and farming mushrooms and potatoes before he opened his own studio. "I chose Santo Antônio do Pinhal [160km from São Paulo] because of the resemblance to Japan, with rice fields and mountains," he says.

In an open-plan workshop of 360 sq m, surrounded by native Brazilian wood forest, Ebine and his employees (William, Junior and Wagner) work from Monday to Saturday. Their monthly production is small: no more than three tables, 10 or 12 chairs. It's not just because the furniture is handmade but because particular care is taken to ensure the mortise will remain as intact as the wood, which takes time. And it's not just the production that takes time; training a new employee can take up to five years. "But it takes at least 10 years to prepare someone to make something all by himself, and to do it properly," says the master. — (M)

moritoebine.com



How they work:

- 01 Dedication: this is the very definition of slow design. Output is minimal but each item is a masterpiece that will last for generations. This is more important than instant financial gain.
- 02 Natural materials: Ebine sources only Brazilian wood, certified by Brazil's environmental agency IBAMA. Native varieties he uses include cedar, freijó, cherry, Brazilian walnut and mahogany.
- 03 Skills: though Ebine employs only three people, the mortise technique is being passed to a new generation.
- 04 Training: the processes required to make furniture to such a high standard have to be taught in person, with patience, not through a textbook or computer course.
- 05 Sales: besides his own workshop, Ebine has just five stockists: four in Brazil and one in New York. This ensures he has direct contact with the salespeople and a measure of control in how his work is sold.

