

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

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Ensō It Is

“Ensō”—a circle drawn with a single, broad brushstroke (1)—served as Eric Manigian’s initial design for a “conversation table” (2) gifted to the Zen Peacemakers. Using spalted maple, Manigian joined five wood slabs (3) with pinned, locking scarf joints that allow the massive tabletop to be disassembled, transported, and reassembled as needed.

A large tabletop made with slabs of spalted maple is one of the recent works by Eric Manigian that embody the woodworker’s life practice.

I’m reluctant to call this a “spiritual” practice, as “spirit” can be a limiting word if misread as something separate from physical and historical forms. Indeed, every aspect of Eric’s circuitous life path seems reflected in this work: The intricate housed joints that keep the tabletop together stem from his early training as a timber-framer and from his travels to Japan, where he fell in love with traditional temple architecture. He learned how to use the tools he built the table with from Toshio Odate, with whom he studied sculpture at Pratt Institute. Odate later wrote the seminal book *Japanese Woodworking Tools: Their Tradition, Spirit and Use*, which was the first exposure to Japanese woodworking tools for many Western carpenters.

Eric also credits Odate with teaching him that trees have a life force, and that it is a crafts-

man’s responsibility to work with integrity and sincerity out of respect for the tree. A craftsman has an obligation to direct his full attention into the work so as to put that life force to good use. It’s this practice of coming at your work with integrity but without pretension, of concentrating without overthinking or overdoing it, that is really the practice. It’s represented in Zen history by “ensō”—the practice of drawing a circle in one bold stroke. Ensō captures the essence of Zen action and serves as the basis for the table’s design.

Eric was inspired to build *Ensō Table* by the work of Bernie Glassman, an American Zen master who is known for his international peace-building initiatives. Glassman’s organization, the Zen Peacemakers, frequently relies on “council practice,” for which this table is perfectly suited. In a circle, no person sits in a more prominent position than another; all are equal.

Clayton DeKorne is the editor of JLC.

Photos courtesy Eric Manigian Studio