

# *Traveling at Speed in High Style*

Designer **Eiji Mitooka** has created popular rolling stock interior designs that are novel yet feel nostalgic, being fused with a warm and woody ambience. Toshio Matsubara interviewed Mitooka, who is currently working on a new train car design.

## **Where do you place your emphasis when you design rolling stock?**

**Eiji Mitooka:** My major theme is how I can design tools that people can use comfortably. Therefore, I always put myself in the users' shoes when I design. Comfortable sites found in our daily lives, such as stylish restaurants, living rooms, and resort hotel rooms, have to be compressed and encapsulated within the confines of train cars. As I respectfully examine and reconstruct, I combine convenience, colors, shapes, materials, and other elements, fitting the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle.

I don't intend to give form to just some special image as an artist. If I did that, I wouldn't be making publicly used facilities, but would end up with mere works of art.

First, I decide on a concept. I think about what needs to be done for this train, for what purposes, and for whom. I'd like to make a commercial product, not a manufactured product. A manufactured product may be put together by assembling necessary functions, but that is not enough for a commercial product, which can be considered to be meaningless unless accepted by customers. What needs to be done to make

customers happy? Finding the unknown factor is most important, and this is not possible unless I stand in the users' shoes.

## **You have often utilized natural materials and elements of Japanese aesthetics.**

I think identity as a Japanese is needed in our design. The world will understand our designs only if the influences of Japanese culture and history are incorporated. This is why I make use of the materials and traditional crafts unique to the region.

For example, the Kyushu species of mountain cherry is used for wooden furnishings such as the window blinds and frames of the Tsubame 800-series Shinkansen that runs through Kyushu. Camphor laurel is used on its walls. Trains boasting local history and fruits of the environment run on our local railways, and I hope this will enrich our passengers' journeys and make them feel more comfortable.

## **Railways were first built and developed in Europe. What are your opinions on the rolling stock used in**

## other countries?

There are excellent types of rolling stock in the world, such as the ICE, Talgo, and TGV trains, just to name a few. They are all of outstanding design. The good old Orient Express was the world's best-quality sleeper train, and it brought the luxury associated with the gorgeous mansions of the nobility to railway cars. This is what we've been trying to do, although on a slightly different scale and level. My question is whether a train car can surpass a resort hotel. Railways run along mountains, rivers, and oceans, and their window views are significantly more exciting than those of resort hotels. If the quality of services and the interior designs are enhanced, I think we can make a train that surpasses hotels.

## Design plays an important role in the travel experience, it seems.

For example, the Yufuin-no-Mori express train and Hitoyoshi steam locomotive I designed feature a buffet. Passengers can drink coffee and have a chat with the service crews, which will likely make a memory for them. We are helping to make remarkable journeys. Excitement and a luxurious time are important when people travel, and both the crews and the passengers are "actors on stage" and performing their roles. It's the designer that acts as a stage for all the processes. My belief is that designs need to convey some sort of a story.



### Eiji Mitooka

Born in 1947, Mitooka is head of Don Design Associates. Working as an industrial designer and illustrator, Mitooka has come up with innovative designs in a number of fields, including architecture, rolling stock, graphic arts and product design. He has won a number of awards, including the prestigious Brunel Award, an international award for railway-related designs, for his designs of trains' interiors and train stations for JR Kyushu. Mitooka is pictured here with a model of the Tsubame 800-series Shinkansen, the interior of which he designed.

YOSHIFUSA HASHIZUME

## What sort of rolling stock would you like to design in the future?

I am currently preparing a project to create the world's best resort train. It will be a seven-car sleeper train that will take a three-night, four-day trip through Kyushu. I want to make rolling stock that employs the world's best arts decorations, from China, Italy, the United Kingdom, and other countries based on Japanese culture. The train is scheduled to go into service in two and a half years. I would be happy if the train encouraged passengers to design their own journeys and be something that exceeds the Orient Express. 

*Toshio Matsubara is a freelance writer.*