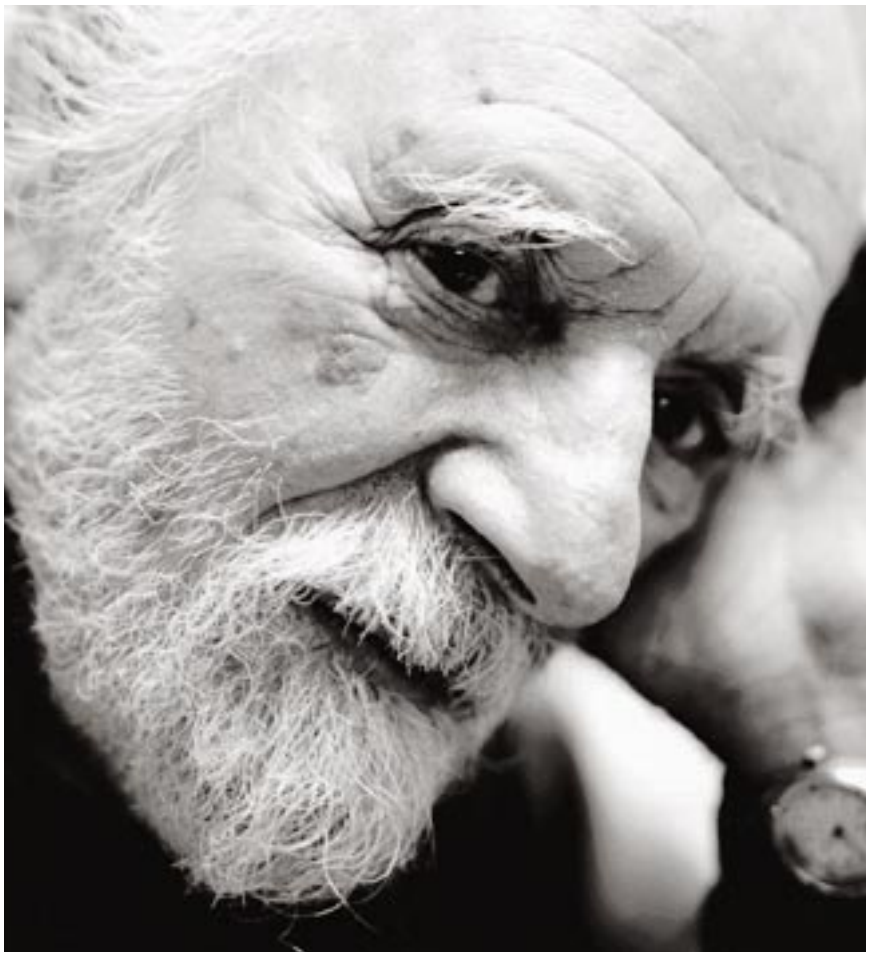
James Krenov

Practical lessons from a renowned master



Woodworkers from all over the world have made pilgrimages to learn from this master craftsman. Though he recently retired from teaching, you can still learn from his experience as he walks you through his process for designing and building one-of-a-kind furniture.

On the short list of the world's leading masters of the craft, most woodworkers put James Krenov's name near the top. His work is in museums worldwide. He's received dozens of honors over the years, and has written several books that have profoundly influenced both professional and hobbyist woodworkers. To learn more about the man, see "A legend in his time" on *page 71*.

Krenov, though, is more devoted to teaching than pursuing glory. Until his retirement this year, he led the Fine Woodworking Program at California's College of the Redwoods, shown *below*.

Here, he shares his down-to-earth techniques for designing and building your own furniture. (To learn what the future holds for Krenov and the school, see "What comes next?" on *page 72*.)

Put Krenov's wisdom to work in your shop

"It's fine to use somebody else's plans when you're learning techniques but it's only natural to want to do your own work, too," Krenov says. "Even when you're just beginning, you don't need to limit yourself to other people's ideas. You can make what you want to make on the level where you happen to be. And you can use the experience to learn and move up a level or two."

No hurries, no worries

"Don't be in a hurry," Krenov always told his students. And they listened—during a nine-month course working eight hours or more a day and five, sometimes six, days a week, students in the program might end the year with one or two finished pieces.

Krenov's next advice: "Decide what you want to build and why." Purpose almost always guides design. What you want this piece to do and where you want it to do it will determine its shape and size. It also will help determine how long it might take to complete.

"If you're making a jewelry box on a stand for a particular person, think about that person, how tall she is, what she likes," Krenov says. "If you're making a table, think about the people who'll sit at it. How many are there? Are they large people? Small? What do they like?"

Sometimes, furniture's purpose is to display a particularly nice bit of grain in a prized board, but Krenov advises against ignoring function altogether.

"I think anybody who works with wood for any length of time will eventually want to do something that's primarily aesthetic, that shows off either the wood itself or your design. But you should always remember somebody has to live with this thing so it should be serviceable as well as pretty."

Krenov presides over his classroom at the College of the Redwoods' Fine Woodworking Program. Students of any age can choose from an intensive nine-month course during the school year, or take several seminars and workshops offered during the summer.

Krenov sketches a project, and then makes a rough ruler from scrap paper to get a sense of scale. "No need to be too careful or precise with drawings. Let yourself go. Just doodle," he says.

Put pencil to paper

Once the piece has shape in your mind, put it on paper. Start with a pencil sketch and don't worry about being pretty.

"And please, don't be careful about it," Krenov says. "Train your eye. Look around for shapes and curves and lines that please you. Play around a little bit and have fun. That's why we're drawn to this sort of thing, it's supposed to be fun."

Krenov rarely takes time to convert his rough sketches into scaled drawings, "but if it makes you more comfortable to use a straightedge and get all the dimensions right, have at it," Krenov says.

Once you have a shape and design you like, check the scale. You can use rulers or protractors, but "you don't need anything fancy," he says, while sketching ideas for a small display stand, as shown in the photo, *above*.

"Start with the focal part of what you're making," he says. "If I know I want the top part to be 24" high, I'll use the drawing to make my own ruler. Let's say two marks equals 24" for the top part." Krenov lays his scrap paper against the sketch and draws hash marks for the top of his cabinet, then follows the pattern down the length of the drawing, creating a crude ruler, with marks roughly representing 12" increments.

"Now we apply that scale to the stand and see how high we've made it. If it's way out of proportion—too high or too low—now is the time to make big adjustments. Little refinements can come later."



With fresh paper wrapped around his cardboard model, Krenov sketches in doors for a cabinet. "Simple alterations in design elements can change the way a piece will look," Krenov says. "Making the outside pieces go all the way to the top and bottom of a door frame will give you a vertical look and reversing that—making the top and bottom go the entire width of the door—will give you a more horizontal look. The door doesn't change size but the feel is different."

Moving from two dimensions to three

The heart of Krenov's process starts now, with the building of a full-size cardboard or paper model. The basic process is shown in the photos, *above*.

The cardboard model can be a simple box that happens to be the right size or a complex cutting and taping job that simulates wood thicknesses as well as height and width. Often, the simpler approach is adequate, and you needn't worry about making the cardboard pieces the accurate thickness, unless the thickness of a particular part affects overall dimensions.

"Most people, when they get to this point and actually see the volume of what they've drawn, say 'Gee, that's a lot bigger than I thought it was going to be,'" Krenov says.

If you're going to rethink your design—change the size, drawer configuration, rearrange shelves, curve the legs a little more—now is the time to do it.

Try your ideas in wood

Next comes building a full-dimension wood mock-up. This can be a complete project, or maybe just a corner or the framework for drawers, as seen in the photo, *right*. If you've built something similar to your piece before, and you feel confident about the joinery techniques, you might skip or modify this step. But if this is the first project of its kind to take shape in your hands, or if you're considering using new techniques, Krenov recommends a dry run.

"Whatever you're not sure of, you should try in practice wood first before you use the good stuff," he says. Poplar is a good choice—less expensive than other hardwoods but similar in workability.

This is the time to experiment. Try different joinery methods. Krenov pretty much sticks to the old school and uses dowels for most joints. "But like Bobby Dylan says 'The times they are a changin,'" Krenov says.

"If you want to try biscuits or something else entirely, try it. The way I do things is just one way, not necessarily the right way or even the best way. Experiment, look for refinements."

Although Krenov and his students rely highly on hand tools, he acknowledges there are other ways to do things.

"We certainly use power tools. Gadgets are fine, and we're not against easing the pain," he says. "But when your hands and eyes will do just as good a job, I prefer to do it that way. There are people who prefer to make dovetails with a router. They're certainly strong and they fit, but they don't have the feeling that a human hand made them. They don't make music. We're trying to make music."

In many ways, the mock-up becomes your teacher, allowing you to make rookie mistakes as well as insightful discoveries before you start the finished piece. The mock-up's value shows when it comes to gluing up a one-of-a-kind creation. If you're assembling a complex project it can be difficult to know where to start. The mock-up will teach you.

To practice your joinery, make full-size mock-ups, such as these hand-cut dovetail samples, the kind Krenov says "make music."

Krenov strives to help students develop their "reading" ability with visual aids such as these examples of multiple cuts following the grain on cabriole legs. Krenov emphasizes that with a little planning, no matter what the grain does in a furniture part, each cut can be laid out to make the best use of grain in harmony with design.

The mock-up also allows you to experiment with character-enhancing details. Certain hand-carved elements—drawer and door pulls, spring-loaded door catches and shelf brackets—have come to be known as "Krenovian" touches and can give a piece of furniture a personal flavor.

Now for the real deal

When practice is over and it's time to build the real thing, Krenov advises starting with the trickiest part.

"If you're trying to show off some nice grain in panel doors, start with those panels and then build the doors," he advises. "If something happens along the way—the panels don't hold up or need to be made smaller—you can adjust the cabinet's carcase to fit the doors. But if you start with the cabinet first, there's no room for adjustment."

Choice of wood is a matter of individual taste. Krenov is regarded as one of the best at choosing. His ability to read grain and incorporate it in furniture, as shown in the photo, *above*, has earned him much of his reputation, but he encourages new ideas and experimentation.

"There really is no right or wrong," Krenov says, "but there are degrees. There is better and worse. There are complementary woods—woods with color and grain that work well together. Mahogany and pear for instance. Maple and ... well, there are a lot of things that go well with maple ... like walnut, sometimes cherry, some of the exotic South American woods.

"You have to judge each piece [of wood] individually and keep your eyes and your mind open to the possibilities."

A legend in his time

James Krenov often is credited as the spark that ignited a renewed interest in handmade furniture in the last quarter of the 20th century. The first of his four books, titled "A Cabinetmaker's Notebook," published in 1975, generally is considered the most influential.

As they do in any discipline, masters become known for their particular strengths. Krenov is known for his keen sensitivity of design and artistry with hand tools.

"He's just phenomenal," says Taimi Barty, a Harvard engineering graduate who studied under Krenov. "He has an amazing eye and he's got a talent for getting other people to develop their eye."

Born in 1920 in Siberia, the only child of aristocratic Russian parents, Krenov was raised in Shanghai, then remote villages of Alaska and finally in Seattle.

He remembers as a young boy playing for hours by himself making intricate toys from wooden matchsticks. "Some of the Alaskan children would watch for a while, this thing whatever it was taking shape, and then they'd come over and we'd do it together," he says.

After a stint as a boat builder, Krenov studied in Sweden with Carl Malmsten, "Godfather" of Swedish design.

From Sweden, Krenov went to Boston and then New York as a college lecturer in design and woodwork. He taught for a while at the Rochester Institute of Technology. During a lecture series in the 1970s, he visited former students in Northern California and first encountered the Mendocino coast. He moved West with his wife Britta, and struck a deal with the community college which, in 1980, built a shop to his specifications in the little coastal town of Fort Bragg. The Fine Woodworking Program and Krenov have been going strong ever since.

This eight-drawer showcase is built from Kwila and broadleaf maple, with wrought-iron hardware. It's elegant lines and complementary woods demonstrate Krenov's talents as a designer and builder.

Finishing touches

When it comes to finishing, Krenov stays with tradition. Standard practice is to use a combination of oil; shellac (which Krenov calls "polish," as in French polish); and wax, usually in that order.

"Once again, experimenting, a willingness to try new things is good," Krenov says. "I was brought up on polish and it's still what I usually rely on, but depending on what kind of abuse your piece of

Finding the right use for the right piece of lumber is one of Krenov's fortes. A 2001 graduate put it this way: "He's got the most incredible eye for what will look right. You can look at something for days, weeks even, wondering why it's not quite right. He'll look at it for a minute or two, say 'Try this' and it works perfectly."

furniture is going to be subjected to, you might want to look at some of the other possibilities, like urethanes."

Finishing often starts with a coat of oil, but not always. "Something like Danish teak oil can really bring out the grain in some woods and offer good protection, but you have to be careful," Krenov adds. "If you put oil on pear wood, it looks like the garage floor. You should always experiment [with some scrap stock leftover from your project]."

Next comes the "polishing," a hand-rubbing process commonly called French polishing in which a cloth soaked in shellac and denatured alcohol is balled up into a second cloth which is rubbed on the wood's surface.

Finally, for protection and luster, Krenov often applies wax as a last step. Sometimes he uses a commercial brand. At other times he mixes up a wax of his own concoction.

Parting words

Over the past couple of decades, teaching has become as important to Krenov as the craft itself. He seems more passionate about connecting with people and sharing ideas than finding a really special piece of spalted maple.

"This is not an oddity what we're doing here," Krenov says waving an arm across the landscape of his shop where 20 students are busy building hand planes. "People are doing this all over the world and I think the appreciation for this sort of work is growing.

"I would hope with magazine stories like this you can show people they can achieve great things. People tend to isolate me and they say 'Oh sure, he can do that.' But really anybody can achieve at a higher level than they thought they could before they tried. The thing is, you have to try."

For more information on the Fine Woodworking Program, contact:

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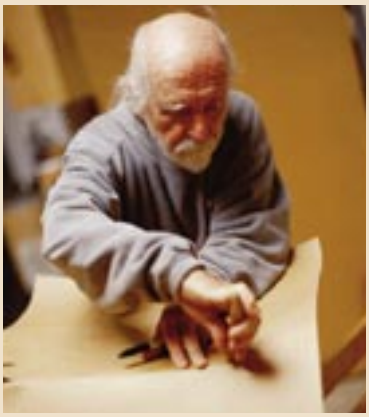

What comes next?

For the first time in more than 20 years, James Krenov is working in his own shop, and not at the school he helped make famous. For everyone involved, Krenov's retirement brings changes.

The College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking Program will carry on—in fact, applications for summer and fall classes are more plentiful than ever. "We can't replace Jim. I think we all know that," said Michael Burns, who founded the school with Krenov and continues teaching there. "But we intend to carry on the traditions and style we've developed here, trying to keep the same spirit that Jim brought to this place."

Krenov, 82, plans more time on the beach with his wife, Britta, more time on the tennis court, puttering in his new home workshop, and "maybe a little writing if the spirit moves."