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A LONG AND CONSISTENT LIFE OF CREATING: JAMES KRENOV, CABINETMAKER AND TEACHER

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James Krenov (1920–2009), a lifelong cabinetmaker and teacher, demonstrated and encouraged a balance of discipline and playfulness in his work and writings. He gave voice to woodworkers who objected to the commercialism of creativity. Taimi Barty, a student of Krenov, explores his physical workspaces throughout his life in an effort to understand his effectiveness in inspiring an international audience of craftspeople.

KEYWORDS: Cabinetmaking, Carl Malmsten, College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking, creative space, James Krenov, 1970 crafts movement.

I miss him. I miss his curious eye casually assessing my work, sometimes trailing his hand along the edge of the cabinet I am working on. I miss his stubby fingers with a rim of dirt under the nails, pleasantly hand planing a cabinet side on his workbench. Not only was James Krenov (1920–2009) a master craftsman, he was also a master of crafting words and his words to me are what I miss most. Sometimes poetic and funny, sometimes inspirational words of compassionate advice, sometimes harsh criticisms, his words still resonate in my mind almost daily. “Don’t get carried away buying tools unless you have an oil well in your back yard,” he told my class during the first week of school in an effort to teach us one of his primary philosophies of keeping it simple and not wasting money on gadgets. “You don’t have to be tempted by things unnecessary. Let function guide you.”

Meeting Krenov changed my life. His suggestion that woodworking is “a way of living rather than a way to make a living,” somehow appealed to me so strongly that it prompted me to leave a career in the city as an environmental engineer and resonated with me so clearly that I become a self-employed woodworker in the stead. I have often wondered how on earth that happened. I do not look back with any regret but I do reflect with curiosity. And, I am not alone. It happened to many of us. “‘Good things’ aren’t (a) new (idea),” Krenov once said during a lecture. I think we wanted to learn to build “good things” and we wanted to build them in the way he suggested, by working in harmony with the wood, tools, and our selves. I met Krenov when he was 80 and I was 28, in 2000 and I studied him

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during the last two years of his teaching career. Our relationship continued after his retirement and with time he became a surrogate grandfather to me.

Krenov created his whole life. Born in Siberia in 1920, the only child of Dimitri and Julia Krenov, the family moved to Shanghai, China in 1921 and stayed there with James's grandfather for a few years. The family then moved to a remote village in Alaska where his intrepid, high society, Russian parents taught the Inuit school children. Little James played with his two dogs and made his own toys with a steel jack knife. "It was a joy to me that I could rely on my hands and my eyes to produce things," Krenov recalled. By 1930 the family moved south to Seattle. As a young man during World War II, Krenov served as a Russian interpreter for the military when Russian ships docked in Seattle. He also worked for a ship chandler and spent a great deal of time surrounded by boats. He loved the lines of boats. "There's hardly a straight line on them, but there's harmony. People think right angles produce harmony, but they don't. They produce sleep," Krenov said later in life.

In 1947 Krenov embarked on a trip around the world to study craftsmanship and architecture, possibly inspired by his paternal grandfather who was an accomplished architect. At the age of 27 Krenov had landed in Stockholm, Sweden with a job in a lightbulb factory. It was at this time he met two Swedes, critical in the development of his life: Carl Malmsten, the father of Scandinavian furniture design and Britta, the prettiest and brightest young woman in Sweden. One became his teacher and friend at Malmsten's "Verkstadsskola" or School of Craftsmen in Stockholm; the other became his wife.

Britta and Krenov first met in Paris in 1949. She recalls that she fell for him in large part because of his passion. He just loved to work and loved to create furniture that seemed to evolve out of the wood. "When I work it feels sometimes like someone is standing behind me and dictating how and what I should do," Krenov told architect Sar Alf Folmer (1979). Driven with what almost seems like a sense of duty to bring the wood back to life again, Krenov worked every day. Never in a hurry but always working. I recently spoke with Britta at her home in Fort Bragg, CA about Krenov's creative spaces in an effort to understand what allowed and enabled Krenov to create what he did with the effect that he had. After all, she had been there before Jim had his first workshop and now lived in the home where he had his last. Britta explained that she had just given birth to their first daughter when she was offered a position as an economics teacher and Krenov was finishing up at Carl Malmsten's woodworking school. The young couple hired a babysitter for their daughter and as luck would have it, the babysitter's husband had a woodworking shop in their garage into which Krenov was invited to work. Out of that garage shop, Krenov generated the work that launched his career. He built three small pieces that were well received by "Stockholms Hantverkare" or the Stockholm's Cabinetmakers Guild. Articles appeared in the paper, exhibit invitations came in, as did the commissions. Krenov and Britta moved from their apartment in Stockholm to a house with a three room basement. The basement became Krenov's shop. As Britta recalls, there was his work bench, a bandsaw, and a jointer. Krenov referred to his two machines as his "heavy lifting coworkers" during the Folmer

interview. It seems that all of his work happened down in the basement; Krenov rarely brought anything upstairs into the house.

During his two years at Malmsten's school (1957–1958), Krenov earned traditional training in the discipline of cabinetmaking. During the late '50s and '60s, in Sweden, cabinetmakers worked in production shops crafting furniture according to drawings created by designers. Craig McArt notes in the foreword of *Worker in Wood* (1997, p. 10) that Krenov was seemingly alone in Sweden as a cabinetmaker who regarded the conception and realization of a piece as a single, personal effort. The next 15 years were spent doing just that. He built wall cabinets, boxes, cabinets on stands, and much more. There is no specific piece, in my mind, that represents Krenov. More, it is an overarching simultaneous playfulness and elegance that defines his style. His pieces were relatively small in size with subtle curves. He would place tiny drawers and suspended shelves “just for fun” inside the cabinets for the owners to discover. His use of spalted wood, an effect in the wood caused by moisture and fungus, that almost appears like a pencil line, was something Krenov played with for visual effect in several of his pieces. Krenov designed and built commissioned work as well as work that has since been placed in museums and private collections around the world.

By the mid-1970s Krenov had been invited to teach and lecture from the east to the west coast of America, to Japan, to New Zealand. These invitations brought Krenov in contact with an international audience that was silently and independently, in their separate workshops, rebelling against the recent movement in crafts toward high tech mass production. In this cultural climate Krenov was encouraged to write his first book, *Cabinetmaker's Notebook* (1976) in which he expressed the notions that many were longing to feel ratified. The primary concern is not with the technique, speed, and novelty but rather with the intuitive feel for what is right and the relevance of curiosity and integrity. “Krenov's words are balm for these (craftsmen) and others. He reassures them that ease and speed of accomplishment are but one measure of the worth of task and product. Emotional, spiritual or ethical involvement is a personal attitude that increases the value of the activity, at least to the maker, and may also be recognizable as inherent in the object made with generosity and humility,” writes Donald McKinley in the afterword of *Worker in Wood* (1997, p. 124). The first book was so well received that it was followed by three others within the next five years. Krenov was giving voice and affirmation to feelings of crafts people around the world. Krenov wrote his books down in the basement workshop in Sweden, in the company of his cat. Cats have been a part of Krenov's workshops throughout his life. Britta remembers how their kids did not go down in the basement workshop, “Only the cats.”

The lectures and books created by Krenov encouraged people, let them believe that they were allowed to play, to be curious and try new things within the craft, no matter what their background. People, internationally, were inspired to hear him speak about the meaning of the work, of letting the wood be the guide and of making music with his hand planes. In his books Krenov describes the sense of discovery with each piece he built and the sense of adventure he felt while working. The furniture he created became a part of him and his artistic fingerprints enhanced the beauty of his work. It was a symbiotic relationship. He was not speaking to

professional cabinetmakers but rather to the amateurs, in the true sense of the word: those who love the material and the work of their craft more than anything else about it. It resonated so clearly with crafts people around the world who could not and would not join the commercialism of creativity.

In 1981 the cabinetmaker and Britta moved from Sweden and put their 60-year-old roots down in Fort Bragg, a coastal town in Northern California. The College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking Program was launched, with Krenov as the head teacher. I wondered to Britta whether Krenov had had any input in the design of the physical layout of the school; what if any expectations he had of his creative space. Mostly it seems that he just moved in, took the back corner bench, and started working. For many years he worked in the bench room along with the students. Britta remembers that Krenov would like to be around the students but that the constant interruptions would sometimes be frustrating. He did not seem to require much, although admittedly he had co-workers who maintained the machine portion and all of the logistics of the shop while at College of the Redwoods. In a way, he had the luxury to be free, to immerse himself in his work and let his curiosity and medium guide him without the typical struggles of life like machine maintenance and deadlines that many of us are burdened with.

As the head teacher at the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg Krenov taught his students to design and build furniture, not by putting pen to paper with tedious measurements. "Twice of a little is something," he told my class. He encouraged mock-ups; cheap wood and cardboard put together to establish the space and volume of the piece. My mock-up of a desk and gallery warranted Krenov to bark, "That looks like two speakers on top of a table," as he shuffled by my bench with an overripe banana and a cup of tea in his hands. I was shattered to get that kind of a comment from my teacher. I had thought I liked my design but almost before the words were out of his mouth, I knew he was right. My proportions were wrong. Krenov knew proportions. He constantly reminded his students to use logic and to think of the person who would ultimately be interacting with the piece we were working on. "If you keep it simple you become a person who makes personalized stuff." The details were sure to evolve as the wood grain and color were exposed and spoke to the maker.

The setting in which Krenov taught the art of fine woodworking at College of the Redwoods is part of what mesmerized me, drew me in, and encouraged me to leave my old world behind. I fell in love with the workshop, the minute I walked into his space. The worked work benches with countless slips of the chisel, leaving permanent scars, the plane shavings strewn on the floor, the burnt smell of Thanksgiving French Roast Coffee wafting from the maker in the corner, the warmth, and I mean that literally. Krenov liked his workspaces warm. Years later, when he would stop by my own shop to see what I was working on, the first criticism was always, "Taimi, it's too cold in here." I could not have agreed more but warm was not an option, in the uninsulated, concrete floored, metal roofed space I rented at the time.

Each of the 20 or so students at the College of the Redwoods have their own work bench for hand work, a tool cabinet, and a sharpening station. A communal machine room is connected to the South. Beyond the machine room was a storage

room, approximately 15' × 20'. This became Krenov's work space for the latter years, after he had had one too many interruptions from the students. As I remember, his work room contained his Swedish workbench with a bench light. His hand planes were angled in a trough running lengthwise on his bench. Chisels were next to his oil sharpening stones. The carving chisels were in a box under his bench. Beside the bench, a pair of handmade saw horses would hold the piece he was working on and a cardboard barrel housed his Swedish aluminum clamps. A set of heavy duty standards were attached along one wall where he stored his larger planks. The bottom plank had a thin mattress on which he would nap now and then. There was a photograph of Britta, his wife, in the Swedish mountains. That was it. The whole creative space was smaller than most modern walk-in closets.

After a heck of a retirement party, Krenov stopped teaching the philosophy of the fine art of cabinetmaking formally and had a shop built at his home. He worked in that creative space until he passed away. That shop was probably 10' × 10'. It had a bandsaw, an Inca table saw with a mortiser, a 4" jointer and his work bench. Clamps hung on the wall and in a corner, the same cardboard barrel of clamps. Even when almost blind, he would drive that bandsaw. I would visit him and he would be on the saw, seemingly guided by the wind off the blade and the sound of the teeth through the wood. A simply terrifying feat to witness but he knew what he was doing. He had done it for 80 years of his life, almost every day.

During the two years I studied woodworking under Krenov and his co-teachers, my favorite days were Sundays and I am sure they were Krenov's as well. School was technically only in session six days per week but if a teacher was around, the other day was fair game. That left Sunday. Krenov would show up around half past ten and two or three of us would be there, waiting. He would unlock the school and disappear into his back room until early afternoon. We would be working, most often without the overhead lights on, in the peace and quiet. By early afternoon Krenov would saunter out toward the kitchenette. If someone's project had something interesting going on, he would stop, peek, and comment. He told it like he saw it and some people's feelings were hurt by that. I remember one time I was gluing up a drawer. I had probably spent most of a week cutting dovetails and here I was, in the moment, trying to glue it up. The joints were too tight and would not come together. I was sweating as the glue started to set. Amassing bigger clamps and hammers to convince the wood and glue to yield to my intentions, Krenov stopped by my bench and yelled at me for cutting my dovetails too tight. Thanks. Ever since, I promise you, I have been trying to make them not-too-tight, because obviously the man was right. The timing was also unforgettable, if not harsh.

Even after retirement, Krenov come by my shop and checked on my pieces. Besides commenting on the temperature inadequacies, he always had important and useful suggestions about my work. Never once did I disagree with his suggestions, although they always cost me time. The end result was better because of his reminders to pay attention to the lift of the grain in the wood or the suggestion of including a small, elegant detail somewhere in the piece to be discovered later by the user. "On the way to conventional efficiency we often neglect some emotions and miss some joys. We drift into competition. Less romance, more reality.

Less time for those little discoveries, for following them through to their enjoyable and rewarding end, for being at ease,” Krenov wrote in his book, *The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking* (1992, p. 6). I personally and professionally struggle with that dichotomy every day. It is not easy to strike a balance between romance and reality.

Krenov’s creative spaces, from Sweden to the United States, were barely more than shoeboxes, from beginning to end. They were not so much of a physical nature but more of an emotional and intellectual state. Krenov’s creativity stemmed from his immense curiosity and appreciation of the materials he worked with. The sense of play, of always trying something new, by experimenting and learning from his material and previous experiences—that truly was his creative space, his magic. He interacted with the wood, his hand tools, occasionally a machine, and sometimes a student. His life was his workspace and I am so very fortunate to have been a small part of it. “Logic and luck are the driving forces,” Krenov once said. That freedom was so foreign and enticing to the 28-year-old engineer in me that now, in hind sight, it is obvious why Krenov had the effect he did on my life.

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