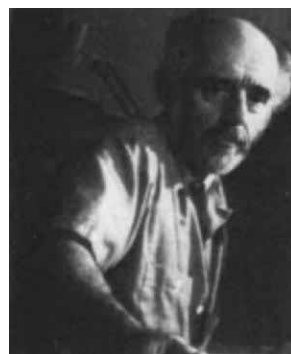


Cabinetmaker's Notebook

Some thoughts on working with wood

by James Krenov



It's always a little difficult for me to begin talking about wood because it is usually a matter of looking at it in one of two ways. One way is a generality, as just a material that we make things of—and that for me, is too wide, shallow, and impersonal. But there are people for whom wood and working with wood is not simply a profession but a very intimate thing: the relationship between the person and the material, and *how* they are doing it. I mean how they are doing it in the most intimate detailed sense; the relationship between wood and the tools that they use, between their feelings, their intuitions, and their dreams. Wood, considered that way, is to me *alive*.

I always think of wood as being alive. I grew up in primitive places, in the North where there were many legends and the supposition that some objects were animated and alive with a spirit of their own. Sometimes, when I work, this creeps into the atmosphere: the sense that maybe the wood and the tools are doing, and want to do, something which is beyond me, a part of me, but more than I am. And I don't want to ask too many questions about this. I note it as a curiosity, perhaps a bit exaggerated, but there is always this element of discovery, the sense of something happening which is more than you expect.

Wood, thought of that way, very personal and elusive, is almost a way of living. Various people have asked me about this, and in talking about it one or another would say, "You know, you have a love affair with wood." Perhaps this is true; it is a kind of lifelong love affair with wood and everything that is around it.

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A long time ago, I spent some time in a school for cabinetmakers in Sweden.... Our teacher used to tell us about the old-timers and how they made their own tools, planes among them, and I began to think of the plane as being the cabinetmaker's violin; the instrument that sets the tone of the music in an orchestra. For me, now, it is *the* tool, in the sense that I enjoy planing the wood with a true plane more perhaps than any other aspect of working. Well, I also like to carve with a knife, and I enjoy working with sharp chisels or a nicely shaped spokeshave, but planing is something special—like the music of the violin.

When I think about a plane, I am thinking about the fine

points. That is, how well it is made, how much work it will do for you, and how much enjoyment it will give. I know very well that a boatbuilder or a carpenter doing very large, rough work needn't be affected by this because the final sensitivity that I am talking about in planes is for the person who wants them and needs them and will appreciate them when doing smallish, sensitive things. I make my own planes—of fine wood and fine steel—not out of nostalgia for bygone days, but because I think that if you have the finest planes, if you have succeeded in making yourself some really fine tools, it does prompt you to work more carefully. Such tools spare energy, they save time for you, and I believe that they allow you to work more joyfully to exceed the performances that you have done before.

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The public does not always know, almost never knows, the difference between the surface which can be produced in sensitive hands and with a sensitive eye, and the surface that you have run off the jointer and belt-sanded. It is, I think in some instances, as bad as that. Not always, of course; I don't want to seem prejudiced in any way, but there is often a tremendous lack of understanding. The more sensitive work you do, the more afraid you will be in the first stages of your life as a craftsman, because you will always be wondering, "Will anyone ever come who will appreciate this? Here I am working, making these tools. Here I am listening to this old man telling about the difference between one surface and another, one edge and another. Will it ever mean anything in my own work and my own existence?" And I am perfectly aware that in many instances it won't; not because you are insensitive, but because of the climate, the craft climate, the attitude towards wood. The fact that for years and years there hasn't been that much work done which is delicate and sensitive in this medium. There has been fine work done on a larger scale, heavier things a bit sculptured and large, yes. But small delicate things—an exquisite little jewelry box, a graceful little table, or a cabinet which is intended for lovely things and is itself a complement to them—this kind of work is rare, almost extinct. There is a true need to create a climate in which it can be done and appreciated. . . .

Around originality there is no doubt a law of diminishing returns; nowadays there has to be. Though maybe we are drowning not so much in the original as in the imitation, in just things. For many of us originality is a pressure; we are being pushed around by people wanting something new, different. Then there's the other pressure of doing the new without borrowing too much of the old, or at least without

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getting caught at it. Students are forever running to libraries to get various books—on peasant art, Scandinavian modern, Shaker, Colonial, Indian—one this and one that. They fill their heads with all these images, and then frantically try to come up with something of their own. As though you put these ingredients in a kettle, add water, stir, and cook for two hours. What do you get? Pottage. Pea soup.

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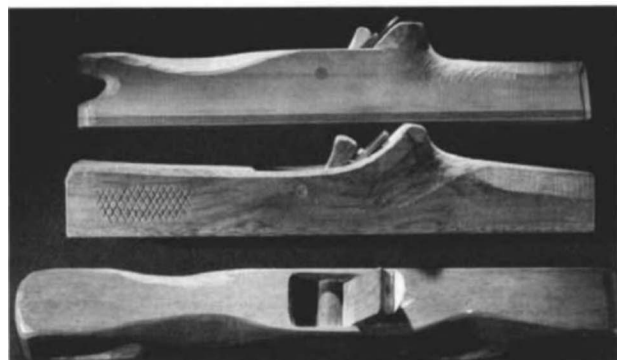
Our machines are treacherous. And I don't just mean they bite; they do. But the real treachery is more elusive. On the one hand they help the cabinetmaker greatly; on the other, they corrupt him. Somewhere between these two ways there is a sensible and sensitive balance which our craftsman must try to find before it is too late.

My machines are not many and not large, but they are adequate in relation to the work we do together. I rely on them and pamper them: they in turn cut clean and straight. By now we know exactly where we stand, they and I.

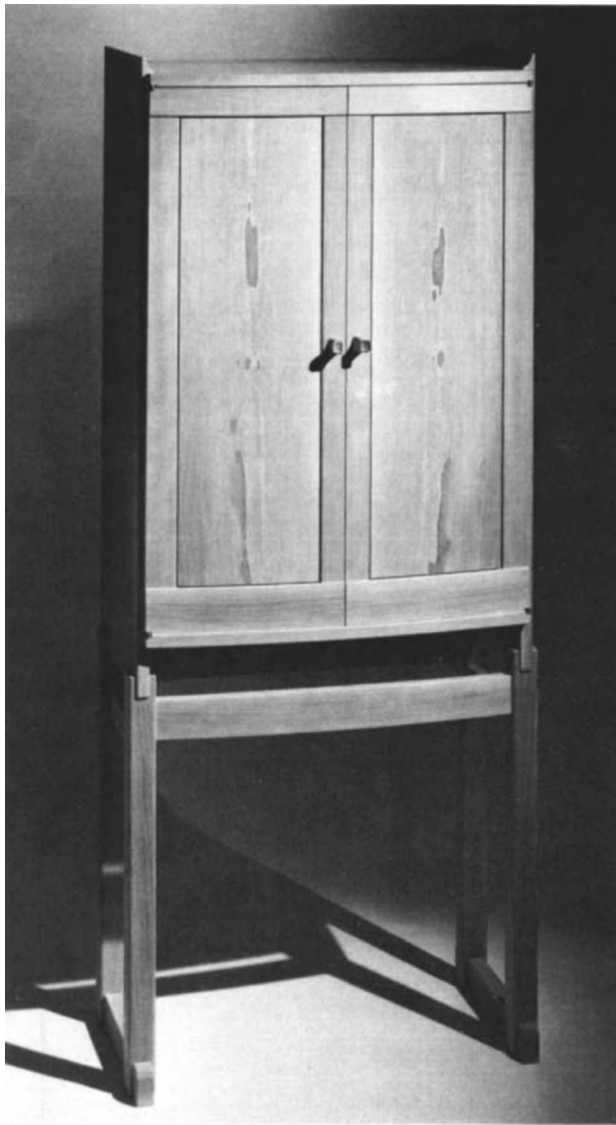
A visitor the other day expressed surprise over these machines—they collided with his impression of the romantic craftsman. He was from England, and I think he brought a bit of a William Morris attitude with him. Here now was this man about whom he had heard, and no doubt the fellow did everything by hand and had a very picturesque and primitive workshop. As he came in and saw my modest but fine equipment he exclaimed, "Oh, so you do have machines!" And I said "Why, of course. How else?" And indeed, what would be the purpose of ripping up the rough stock by hand, doing a vast amount of preparatory work with much effort and little accuracy, and then charging someone for a day or two or three of extra labor. That would be ridiculous, not only from the point of view of cost, but also because of the nature of the work involved. The task of getting the wood to the stage where you can begin to foresee a result and the so-called creative work with fine hand tools is exhausting. If you use up all your energy needlessly doing the hard labor by hand, then usually you won't have the strength and the clarity of purpose to do that fine part later on—when it really counts.

This was not evident to me when I started. Or maybe, simply not having the means to buy them, I minimized the importance of certain machines. Anyway, I did buy a good little bandsaw. For a while I was alone with this saw, a few odd planes, and the first pieces of wood I had gathered. I had to hand-plane everything right from each rough plank. I'd take a running start and then throw myself along that plank on the workbench, trying to get one side and one edge squared up so I could start bandsawing the rest. Oh yes, I did learn something doing it. But I almost killed myself in the bargain. With a jointer I would have been spared half the torture.

On the other hand, in schools where you begin learning at a time when most of us are very vulnerable, there is an overabundance of woodworking machinery. All these temptations! You watch your friends using them. You have an idea about the shape and nature of a certain detail, maybe you even sense that there should be a way for your hands to interpret it. A sound instinct makes you doubt any other way. But there is no clear sight of the tool you need, only the vague notion that it should be there. While here are all these machines which everyone is using, even for such small details. So you leave your impulse and go along with reason. And that



Some examples of the author's work: music stand in lemonwood, jewelry box of Andaman padauk, and planes of boxwood, Indian laurel and Andaman padauk (longest is about 15 inches).



Pearwood cabinet (about 51 inches high). Author's attention to design detail (bottom) includes smaller drawer on right that can open when left door is closed.

shape, those curves, edges—what might have been your expression—becomes the product not so much of enthusiasm and adventure as of efficiency.

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I think there is another way of looking at work, namely, that people who buy objects made by persons like myself don't just want a table because they need a table or a cabinet because they need to keep certain things in it. They can get mass-produced or semi-mass-produced products that will solve those furnishing problems. They are looking for something more. I don't like to think that they are looking for art: certainly I am not thinking of art when I am working and I don't enjoy the aura, the atmosphere, of arty people and arty conversation. What the people who are attracted to my work enjoy is that when they are at home in the evening, and perhaps have friends visiting, they can approach one of these objects and make small discoveries: they can pull a drawer all the way out and turn it around and look at the back of it, and it is consistent and neat and honestly done, and they will note that the bottom is solid wood, and it is fitted in a particular way and it has a nice little profile running along the edges, and that the back of the cabinet is a frame and panel and solid wood, never veneer, and they will be able to experience a handle or a console that supports the shelves or run their fingers along the front edge of a shelf or even the underside of a shelf and find a meaning there. Whatever detail strikes them or appeals to them will be consistent. They, and their friends too, will perhaps be amused by all of this and they will say, "Look, you see this—see this little thing—now look at this other detail; I didn't notice this before myself, although I have had this piece for quite a while.... Look at the underside of this table: the fellow who made this really cared."

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Next is a cabinet in pear wood. Now, right from the start I want to remind you that ordinarily pear wood—the classical pear wood we associate with furniture—is steamed pear wood, reddish in color. That is because they take the log and they saturate it with steam, which gives it a homogeneous pinkish color. The reason is that pear wood, when used in production of furniture, more than one-of-a-kind, varies so much in color that it causes a great deal of extra labor and time, which people working in furniture production are not interested in. So they steam it to make it an even color. That way they can just use it as *a* wood.

But here, now, is natural, unsteamed pear wood as it grows and as you cut it. It varies in color from log to log, and within the same plank there is a change, too. So getting this cabinet to be intentional in its tone, with the shadings the way I want them, entailed a great deal of labor. . . .

This cabinet, too, was not drawn up or really planned. It wasn't designed in the sense that I knew from the start how it would look. Details came to me along the way. I made changes from an original rough little sketch that I had. I guessed. I worked by different stages. Try. Change. Look again.

I often make the doors of my cabinets first because it's much more difficult to find the wood and the inspiration for making one door or a pair of doors than it is to make the case of a cabinet. The doors are often decisive for me. If they are

promising, then I have reason to continue with the cabinet. So I made these doors, and then, with their help, I decided what depth the cabinet should be. I began to wonder how the legs and underpart would be. I made up a curved leg and tried it, and it didn't fit. It just didn't belong to this cabinet.

Then I made a straight leg, and it seemed better. I changed the proportions, and gradually it began to belong more to the cabinet. And so I guessed my way along and composed the piece by stages.

The panels in the door—I didn't know from the start that I would even use them. I had imagined that I would have some other pear wood with the grain going in waves or swirls, and this would accentuate the curve of the door. I thought that this blotchy red pattern would sort of crease the door, would make it seem angular for the eye. But finally, after sawing up and trying other pear-wood panels, I sawed this wood with a great deal of worry and fear, because I didn't have any more. I made these panels and I think they are good. I was lucky.

The lighter edge being toward the middle of the cabinet is not just a guess. I did turn the panel both ways, and it turned out that with the lighter part toward the middle of the cabinet, you also accentuate the curve of its front. Whereas, if the darker part were in the middle, you would, perhaps, get a concave or a flatter effect. All these things are, you might say, a chain reaction—one event leading to the other—one discovery leading to another.

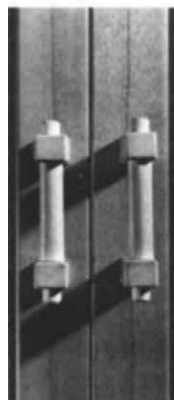
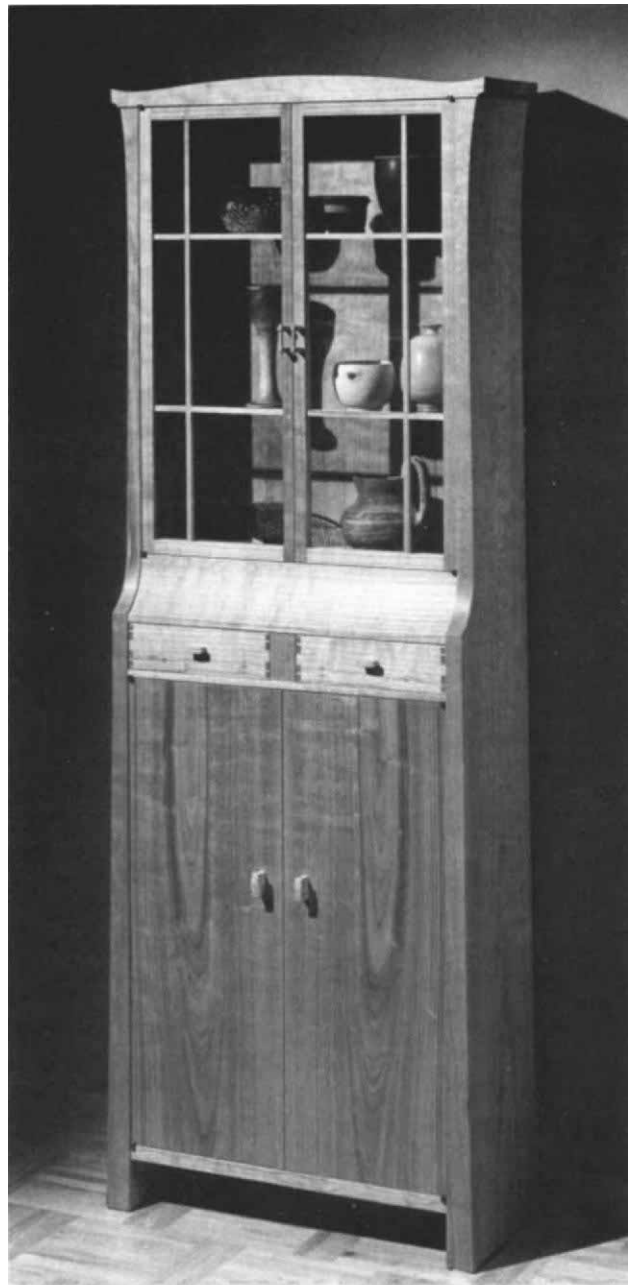
As you open the doors, you have the little drawers inside. The handles may seem too small at first. But remember: you don't want to take your whole hand and go in there and grip something large, because you probably will bump into the top piece of the cabinet. It will disturb you. It seems to me that the natural motion is to come from underneath with one or two fingers and just "pick" out the drawer. Sort of lift it a little bit and draw it out with a finger from underneath. It seems right and it feels good.

The drawer on the right side is smaller so it can be pulled out with only the right-hand door open. You don't have to open both doors to get at the first drawer. The larger drawer, on the left, is accessible when the cabinet is fully open.

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The students and I talk about wood. There will be the beginning of a piece of furniture not yet glued up—maybe the first idea, pieces of wood yet to be given a final meaning. We play with these, move them this way and that to discover what happens as we shift the colors, lines, textures. What happens if the lighter part of a cabinet side is against the wall, or the dark? How does a shape or proportion change as we move past it in a room? Certain shadings and lines add to the pleasant curve of a convex door; others are equally important to a concave one. Observe the graphics of wood; develop the habit of being aware almost without thinking.

These are some facts of wood. For the most part we deliberately ignore them; truly, wood is an exploited and maltreated material. How else can one explain the piling up of wood into weird or slick forms, the often unbeautiful bending, the smearing on of chemicals to "protect," or prevent from drying, or to give a "deeper color." So much of our contemporary work lacks the essence of wood, as it does the essence of an understanding person. Most of what we get is in the current idiom of wood: the arty sculptural or the intricately engineered....



"Pagoda" cabinet in cherry (about 64-in. high). Upper door handles of hornbeam have color and texture of ivory. Unusual spacing and use of through dovetails on drawers enhance decorative effect.