Professor Frid

A former student of Tage Frid describes the extraordinary experience of being taught by the Danish master

BY HANK GILPIN
Professor Frid walked into the shop dressed in a coat and tie, his thick, white, wavy hair perfect. He hung up his coat, rolled up his sleeves and tucked his tie into his shirt. He then turned and walked out of the shop into the alley. It was the first day of class, a basic woodshop course I’d opted for on a whim. As a photography student, I had no real background in wood, but I needed an elective.

We could see Professor Frid through the open door, working with a mysterious contraption, something with a long tube all connected to pipes. He reentered the shop wearing canvas gloves and holding a long, skinny, steaming piece of wood. He quickly and purposefully walked to the front of the assembled students, said something I couldn’t understand and proceeded to tie the steaming stick of wood into an overhand knot. Just like that, my life’s path took a radical bend.

Danish vaudeville
Early that semester, Professor Frid was giving the dovetail demonstration. He described the process very quickly in his thick, Danish-accented English, simultaneously joking with the guys and flirting with the women. So of course no one had a clue what he was talking about. It was like vaudeville, really. He was gauging and scribing and marking while mumbling something about tails and pins and half blind and half pins, still cracking jokes and fixing his tie. He made each cut in three quick strokes with a 3-ft. bowsaw, slapped down the wood, clamped it, dragged a chisel across it, chopped away some waste and then repeated the same actions on the next piece, which he’d marked off the first in a flurry of pencil swipes. He looked at us speculatively over the rims of his glasses, picked up the two pieces of wood and triumphantly tapped them together in a perfect fit. Some of us applauded; others backed away in awe. What a moment!

The simplest solution
Carcase dovetails were always difficult: wide boards, hard wood, lots of pins and tails. Putting glue on all the pins and tails took way too long, and then there was the peculiar problem of clamping.

Professor Frid was watching one of these exercises in bumbling futility—glue dripping, glue drying, odd clamping blocks and a tangled tonnage of clamps. He approached the chaos and told us to get rid of the clamps. He grabbed a hammer, a small block of wood and, laying the carcase on its side, proceeded to hammer the joints together, seating each tail with a single, precise blow. He repeated the process on the other side and quickly moved to another dilemma brewing across the shop.

What didn’t he know?
Thursday morning was question-and-answer time in the shop. I was new to the field, and I’d spend hours in the RISD library, studying the history of furniture. A long list of technical questions piled up over the course of a week. Professor Frid agreed to sit down (which he really wasn’t inclined to do, being a very energetic fellow) and patiently go over my list, one question at a time. He always had an immediate and clear answer. No period, style or technique stumped him. More often

Charisma and craftsmanship. Blessed with a mischievous wit and a traditional European apprenticeship, Tage Frid, who came to the United States from Denmark at age 33, became a powerful teacher and mentor for three generations of American woodworkers. His mahogany cabinet illustrates his calm command as a furniture maker.
than not he’d have two different technical solutions to offer: one of old tradition, focused on old tools and old technology, and the other emphasizing recent innovations in tools, machines, glues and finishes. He’d talk of animal glues and epoxy, chip carving and routers, hammer veneering and plastic laminate, French polish and spray lacquer, rasps and shapers. His knowledge seemed encyclopedic, felt experiential and was unbelievably valuable to me, a rank beginner who was falling under the spell of this amazing man.

Ouch
In Professor Frid’s class, crits—those peer-and-teacher reviews that art students are subjected to—were always interesting but definitely intimidating. His criticism was sharp and only partly cushioned by his humorous comments and jovial banter. It was particularly nerve-racking to know that one of us would invariably be spotlighted for especially tough criticism.

In his comments, sarcasm ruled: “Oh, good curve. Too bad it’s the wrong one.” “Nice dovetails. What’d you use—a chainsaw?” “Beautiful legs, Henry. What were you thinking about—an elephant?” And the classic: “Congratulations. You’ve just figured out the most complicated way to hold a board 30 inches off the floor.” Brutal.

The mysterious pygmy chisels
I’d taken a shine to Professor Frid’s short-bladed tang chisels. They were easy to hold and control, especially when cutting dovetails. I asked him where he’d acquired them. He gave me a quizzical look and said, “At the hardware store, where else?” I couldn’t find them anywhere. Then it dawned on me. Professor Frid was no Zen tool guy. He’d use the closest tool on hand to do whatever needed to be done. His chisels found many uses: paint scraping, can opening, prying, wedging—often brutal, nick-inducing work. When he needed a sharp chisel, he’d simply run to the belt sander and, using the wheel portion of the machine, hollow-grind the nicks away. Then he’d grab a Belgium waterstone and quickly hone down the significant burr. In two minutes flat he had a razor-sharp—and a somewhat shorter—chisel.

Play it by eye
The table legs I was working on were a complex shape, simultaneously tapering and curving, dinghy-shaped in section. I’d purposely drawn this shape so I’d have to explore different tools to make them: spokeshaves, rasps and Surforms, maybe the unwieldy compass plane. I’d made a full-scale drawing with section views at various points in the leg to help me visualize the changing shape. I then made card-board templates of each section view. I thought I’d use the templates while shaping. As I began whaling away, shaping the wood, I would periodically pick up a tem-plate to gauge my progress.

Then Professor Frid spotted me from across the shop. He scurried over, grabbed the templates and tore them to pieces. Calmly, in very clear English, he told me, “The best tool is the eye. Train the eye. The eye guides your hands to achieve the form. If the eye says it’s right, it is right.” I died when I saw those templates go, but that moment changed the way I work for good. Every day I’m in the shop I benefit from the freedom it gave me.

“Get it otta heeah”
Every piece I built in school was designed to explore a new and difficult technical problem. One desk I built was conceived to delve into curvilinear form, heavy shaping and tambours. It was quite derivative, based on a piece I’d seen in a California craft magazine and was by no means traditional, but it was fairly functional and somewhat interesting.

I worked around the clock to complete the desk while Professor Frid was away on vacation over winter session. I finished just in time and was very pleased with the re-
A teacher’s report card: his students

Frid pushed his students to achieve technical mastery of their medium but never insisted on stylistic uniformity. His goal was simply to provide a solid foundation that would enable students to succeed. Frid felt compelled to pass on what he knew, and that was contagious. The photos on the next three pages show work by a half dozen of his former students. Five of the six have been influential teachers themselves, and the other has trained a string of apprentices.

suits. When he walked in, all tanned and relaxed, he looked at one student’s project, said hello to another student and then turned to look at my desk.

He gave it a cursory glance, turned to one of the other students and asked, “Who made this piece of crap? Get it otta heeah.” He chuckled, turned to me and added, “Nice job, Henry, now go design something good.”

Brrrr

We were a graduate class of three that year: Roger, Alphonse and me. When Professor Frid arrived in the morning, Roger and I would be sitting at our benches, drinking coffee and shooting the breeze. Alphonse would join us if he hadn’t been working until dawn. Professor Frid would look at us, look at his watch, scan the quiet shop and ask us if we were having a good time. Then he’d say something like: “Come on, boys, it’s time to work! The day is passing and what are you accomplishing? Go! Go! Go! Your work won’t make itself!”

He’d crack a few jokes while prodding us to work, suggesting, with his inimitable sarcasm, that perhaps we could find other times to waste on idle chatter. And always, as he walked away, he’d point out the window toward the city street beyond and say, “It’s cold out there, boys!”

It was his mantra, repeated over and over: “It’s cold out there. ... It’s cold out there.”

Brrrr ... How true!

Under the eye of the clock

After my classmate Alphonse and I graduated from RISD, Mr. Frid hired us to work in his shop. And work it was: hard, fast, direct. We went right to work at seven and quit at precisely 3:30. A much-loved coffee break of 20 minutes and a quick lunch fuel-up at 12:30 were the only breaks. Each day’s work was planned the previous day with specific tasks assigned to each of us. Mr. Frid acted as manager and foreman. He delegated tasks to suit our abilities while always pushing us to higher levels of craftsmanship and responsibility. He discouraged conversation and questions not pertinent to the task at hand. Any interruption to his concentration received a strong rebuke. Loss of focus led to mistakes, and...
Tage Frid's concern as a teacher

Measurements and went off to his shop, muttering to himself in Danish. I finished framing a door and discreetly left for the day. I returned the next morning at seven. Five minutes later Mr. Frid sauntered down from his shop with a freshly made window, glazed and with casing. We put it in. Emma came back, glanced approvingly, smiled, thanked us and returned to her chores.

Glue and pray

The glue-up was complex and somewhat vexing—too many parts, too many angles and way too many clamps. We almost had it together. Maybe just one more clamp ... just a little more pressure ... BOOM! The entire assembly exploded. Clamps crashed to the floor, and the piece slumped and then splintered. Six weeks of work destroyed. We were distraught. Mr. Frid walked in, eyed the situation, grabbed a glue bottle, splashed glue on the myriad bits and pieces and told us to put it back together—quickly! We did. It worked. The piece, a circulation desk for the RISD library, is still in use today, 30 years later. And only we are the wiser.

An appetite for fine work

The phone rang in Mr. Frid's shop around nine one morning. We were finishing some very elegant doors for a ship restoration. Merlin Szoz was applying gold leaf, I was repairing inlay and Mr. Frid (he was Mr. Frid for quite some time to me!) was French-polishing. He took the call, conversed briefly in Danish and skedaddled out the door toward the house. Merlin and I continued to work. Mr. Frid returned (we could hear the door but not see it), and the bandsaw started up. The sound of the cutting was unusual. Ummznzeepummmm ... ummznzeepummmm ...

BILL KEYSER, VICTOR, N.Y. (RIT, 1959-1961); WENGE AND ASH MUSIC STAND, 1986

"I respected the balance he had in his life," Keyser said, pointing out that Frid not only taught with great energy but also developed a humming furniture business, helped found a gallery for crafts and was extremely devoted to his family. "He was a role model for what is possible." Keyser taught furniture making at RIT from 1962 to 1997.
focused on the singular potential in each individual he taught.

What the heck? I had to take a peek. I took a few paces to look around the corner, and there was Mr. Frid with a frozen pork loin, sawing it into chops. He gave me a quick look, winked, patted his stomach and went back to work.

One more crit
A few years ago I had an open house at my shop. I invited Mr. Frid, but I didn’t think he would come. He was retired and, I thought, perhaps not that interested in what his long-ago students might be up to. But he did come, and I must admit I was very pleased. And I felt a little tingle of nerves.

He walked around the shop for about 45 minutes, checking out the pieces on display. I watched him but was unable to read his reactions. Finally, he walked over to me and said, “So, Henry, this is a good collection of work. And I see you had a very good teacher. But tell me, who is your designer?”

Always the jokester.

A teacher’s gift
Mr. Frid would be the last to accept the notion of genius in his life’s work, but there it was in the improbable combination of supercharged ego and passionate concern for his students. The ego fueled his fiery confidence and self assurance. The concern focused on the singular potential in each individual he taught. Instead of imposing his own very strong aesthetic on students, he demanded that they develop technical breadth and expertise, and simultaneously he coerced and cajoled students to seek a finer articulation of their personal creative passions. Jere Osgood, Bill Keyser, Alphonse Mattia, John Dunnigan, Rosanne Somerson ... each of these and scores of other former Frid students are successful furniture makers recognized for their personal vision and fine craftsmanship. Though a whisper of his ideas might linger in their designs, his real legacy is that he didn’t want or need these or any of his other students to emulate his work, but rather he wanted them to stand apart, with the hope that the skills he taught them would ensure success in their pursuits.

Hank Gilpin designs and builds furniture in Lincoln, R.I.

ALPHONSE MATTIA, WESTPORT, MASS. (RISD, 1971-1973); LACEWOOD AND MAHOGANY BED, 1995

“Tage had a joie de vivre that came through in everything he did. For me it wasn’t his aesthetic so much as his life as an artist that was so exciting and inspiring.”

Mattia, who taught at Boston University’s Program in Artisanship for 11 years, has been teaching at RISD since 1992.

ROSANNE SOMERSON, WESTPORT, MASS. (RISD, 1972-1976); CHESTNUT OAK AND BLEACHED LACEWOOD CABINET, 1995

“Tage gained everyone’s respect with his sense of humor,” Somerson said. “He was charismatic, encouraging, slightly devilish yet fatherly.” Frid hired Somerson to replace him when he retired from RISD in 1985, and she is now head of the furniture department there. Somerson was an early editor at Fine Woodworking and helped Frid with his first book.