

**Editor's note:** Several months ago we asked Hank Gilpin if he would write something about his mentor, Tage Frid. Over the next few weeks we received a stream of post-cards—Gilpin's favorite mode of communication—and we've reprinted them here. Gilpin,

54, now one of the country's top furniture makers, studied under Frid at Rhode Island School of Design

(RISD) in the early 1970s and worked in Frid's shop for a time after graduation. Gilpin caught Frid in the middle of a teaching career—spent primarily at Rochester Institute of Technology and RISD—that stretched from 1948 to 1985 and spawned scores of woodworkers who became prominent in the field. Along with superior craftsmen, Frid's classroom also produced many of the best teachers of the next generation. The range of Frid's influence increased further when he began writing for *Fine Woodworking*. He has been a contributing editor to the magazine since the first issue and also wrote a trilogy of best-selling books for The Taunton Press.



# 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. 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 carcass 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

**“Congratulations. You’ve just figured out the most complicated way to hold a board 30 inches off the floor.”**



**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.

## “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.”



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 Surfboards, 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 cardboard 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 template 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-

**Still tapping the source.** Even long after graduation, a thorny technical problem—this one having to do with an extension table—could occasion a conference with the master. Here, in 1981, Frid visits the author (left) in his shop. Between them is Chris Freed, who helped build the table.



## 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.**

sults. 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



**HANK GILPIN, LINCOLN, R.I. (RISD, 1970-1973); WHITE OAK SIDEBOARD, 1995**

Of his former teacher, Gilpin said, "He didn't educate people in order to reproduce himself or justify himself but to pull things out of them ... he was attracted to the power of potential in a student; he didn't want to crush it. He wouldn't tell a student 'Here's what you are.' Instead, he said, 'Here's what's possible'"

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



**JERE OSGOOD, WILTON, N.H. (RIT, 1957-1960); WALNUT SIDE CHAIR, 1992**

Distinguished as a designer and as a teacher, Osgood taught at RIT from 1971 to 1974 and at Boston University's Program in Artisanry from 1975 to 1985. Osgood said that in the classroom, "Frid was a precipitator, a catalyst—he got the best things out of people. His presence was very strong. He had an energy and a complete devotion to the field I hadn't seen before."



JOHN DUNNIGAN, WEST KINGSTON, R.I. (RISD, 1977-1980); LEATHER ARMCHAIRS, 1988

Dunnigan, who has taught at RISD for 20 years while maintaining his own shop, said, "Tage's influence was often more technical than conceptual. He gave you an honest, practical answer, and you believed it. And I learned a lot about life from him as well as about making furniture." After studying under Frid, Dunnigan served as his teaching assistant and went on to help him with the writing of the second and third books of the trilogy *Tage Frid Teaches Woodworking* (The Taunton Press).

mistakes meant loss of profit—not an acceptable consequence in Mr. Frid's mind. The jovial banter was far less evident here than it had been before in the classroom.

At the stroke of half past three, he put down his tools and sent us home. He'd worked eight hard hours to earn his keep, and the remainder of the day was his to plant and tend the garden or care for his menagerie of farm animals. He felt a person should have interests outside their work or the mind would go stale and then the work would suffer.

### What's the problem?

The banker, the contractor and Mr. Frid stood in the richly paneled English oak boardroom at the turn-of-the-century bank. The bank was moving, and the banker wanted the old boardroom moved to the new tower. The contractor said it couldn't be done. Frid, consulting for both, said, "What's the problem? Of course it can be done!" The following week, under Mr. Frid's supervision, Alphonse and I Skil-sawed the boardroom apart. Three months later, after a bonanza of stripping, repairing, reconfiguring and refinishing, the new tower got its old boardroom.

### Whipping up a window

We were putting a small addition on his house. The job was going well, as his jobs nearly always did: clean and quick, well or-

ganized. We would finish ahead of schedule. Near the end of the workday, Mr. Frid's wife, Emma, surveyed the situation and firmly but gently made it clear that another window was necessary. Mr. Frid made it equally clear that he didn't feel the need. Emma simply pointed to the spot she had in mind for it and returned to her kitchen. Mr. Frid put down his hammer, made a few

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. Ummmmmmzeeepummm ... ummzeeepummm ... ummzeeepummm.

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.



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 Artisanry for 11 years, has been teaching at RISD since 1992.

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 joker.

### 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.*



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.