

Tage Frid

A talk with the old master

by John Kelsey

EDITOR'S NOTE: Tage Frid is retiring as professor emeritus at the Rhode Island School of Design this spring, after a career that more than any other has shaped contemporary woodworking in this country. The photos shown here were taken during his retirement exhibition held last year at the Gallery at Workbench in New York. Frid's third book, about designing and building furniture, will be available this fall. John Kelsey was formerly editor of *Fine Woodworking*.

I crane to see over the crowd as this short, ruddy and cylindrical man explains, in charmingly fractured English, what he is about to do. He will saw and chisel a dovetailed corner, four copies of which could make a box or drawer. The people seem to find the handcut dovetail a wondrous thing, and this man's method is as intriguing as his results: to saw down a measly inch of wood, he hefts a bowsaw the size of your car door. He doesn't hurry, though this won't take long, talking and joking the whole time. The bits of wood will slither together right off the saw, all please applaud. And if not, he'll segue onto track B: how to repair mistakes using your old claw hammer.

This showman is Tage Frid, Danish for 69 years, cabinetmaker for 50 and teacher for 35. He's done the dovetail act a hundred times, he knows that this crowd of amateur woodworkers loves it, can't get enough. He's what they traveled here this weekend to see and what they hope to carry home again. What they get,

what Frid delivers, is a direct line to ancient times, when craftsmen really-by-golly were craftsmen. Those old guys—and there's no doubting Frid is one such—those old guys knew what they were doing, because still older craftsmen had taught them how to work with tools and wood. We can feel the chain unbroken unto antiquity. It's practically religious—we touch the hem of the master's robe, go home fulfilled. Still, I've seen Frid's act a half-dozen times and I'm bored. As I wander away, I wonder how Frid can stand to carry on. Later, I visit Frid at his home and I get the chance to ask:

Don't you get bored demonstrating the same old dovetail?

Maybe you left too early. I always demonstrate difficult joints and techniques depending on what the audience wants. The dovetail is just the overture, so it doesn't really bother me. What I like about teaching is, I learn something new every day. A student asks me, "Why can't I do it this way?" and I think, "Why not?" Then we figure it out.

That's college students, these are hobbyists.

Oh yeah. A lot of professionals, doctors and engineers. I can't imagine being a dentist, with my hands in people's mouths all day. I would need to do something else, to work with my hands on something that wasn't breathing. I enjoy helping people who really want to do woodworking but never had the chance. Spend a two-week summer workshop with them, all of a sudden they're making furniture. It's like Christmas for them, and that's my payoff. Plus, I meet a lot of nice people.

When a person is learning how to woodwork, does it still make sense for him to practice hand-tool methods?

Absolutely. Because when you know how to do it by hand, you can repeat it on the machine. Then when you go to install something and you have to cut some pieces by hand, you're better able to do it. But I used to plane the top of a table or cabinet. Now I take the belt sander, and that's difficult to do right, too. Either way, you want the top smooth and flat and perfect. If I can do it in half an hour instead of an hour and a half, then I'm not so tired and I have more money in my pocket.

Some people say that besides the design and the well-chosen wood, the hand-tool marks left by the maker are what make a craft object worth having. The dovetail isn't quite perfect, it shows that a human made it.

Well, for example, here is a dovetailed drawer that works right and fits well. Don't you think it would have been stupid to hand-

Dick Swift



Frid makes three-legged stools in sets of three, with seat heights of 15 in., 18 in. and 22 in. The design is a response to the problem of making strong, light, yet comfortable seats. He recalls, 'At a horse show one day, my wife and I were sitting for several hours on a six-inch wide rail, yet we felt quite comfortable. All of a sudden I realized that when you sit on a straight wooden seat, you sit only on your two cheek bones. The rest of the seat is unnecessary.'



plane the wood when I have a jointer and a thickness planer and I can do it better and faster by machine? Curly maple, bird's-eye maple, you hand-plane it or put it through the thickness planer and you know what happens—it's all torn up. I've worked out a router jig that cuts it without it tearing up at all. So what is wrong? I can't understand what is so romantic about spending ten times as much time. If it's a hobby and you enjoy it, fine. But a craftsman does have to eat.

Compared to a lot of contemporary work, your pieces aren't expensive. How do you price your furniture?

I have a formula for labor, materials and overhead. The Work-

bench gallery asked me why I don't charge more for the pieces I showed there, charge something for my name. Those pieces aren't high-priced, but I make money on them. Why charge for the name Tage Frid? I want to make furniture anybody can buy, not only a certain class of people. I'll be happy if a person without much money finds a piece of mine he likes and can afford.

That's a craft attitude rather than an art attitude.

No, I think it's a very human feeling, that I don't want to be snobbish. Do you have to be snobbish to be an artist, can't you just be a good craftsman, do nice clean work with good details? If you know what you're doing, you will make money. There's an



Two side chairs show the evolution of a design over 30 years: the 1951 version (on the left) has rungs, while the 1983 chair has a beefier rail under the seat. The square tabletop unfolds into a long rectangle, and pivots to remain centered on its base. Says Frid, 'I had the table's geometry all figured out, but it worked for that one size and not for other sizes. I stayed up nights to figure it out for every size. Boy, that took me a long time.'

honest price for anything. To make that cabinet over there, it would be the same amount of work for you as for me. Maybe I'm a little faster than you, so I make a little more money.

Is there really any difference between making only one piece at a time and producing a hundred copies?

Some things there'd be no difference. But usually the minute you go for mass production, then you take some of the small, nice details away because they cost too much to do. I can compete price-wise with any of the furniture factories anytime because I don't run with their overhead, sales organization, advertising, dealers, and all of that in between. People come to me after looking at a catalog where there's a six-foot table, they want it six-foot-six, I don't care, I just charge a little more. A factory can't do that. That's why there'll always be a market for mass produced furniture and a living for the craftsman as well.

Do you think there's more of a market now than when you first came to this country?

Oh, are you kidding? When I came in 1948 it was hard like hell to make a living. I had to do some refinishing just to make money. I hated it, but I did it. Then when we started Shop One [a retail gallery in Rochester, N.Y.] in the early fifties, people were used to furniture that was upholstered right down to the floor. All of a sudden there I was making tables that looked like they were floating, chairs that were so light that people were afraid to sit in them. But then after a while people realized that it was all right for furniture to be nice and light, and soon I had eight people working for me. I found out that that wasn't what I wanted.

Sounds like success to me. What didn't you like?

When I started, I thought I could just sit in the corner designing. Before I knew it I was the salesman, the worrier, the cutting-up

man, not quite the sweeper but just about. Finally we were making money, and I quit. The accountant said I was stupid, crazy. But I wasn't happy. I even got an ulcer. Then when I started a one-man shop, sometimes with one helper, I actually cleared more money.

Many of our best woodworkers are trying very hard to make more money by marketing their furniture as art. They strive to give their pieces the art aspect that contemporary ceramics and glass have acquired. Does this make sense to you?

It all depends on what you call art. If you make sculpture, there are no limitations, you can do whatever you want, because it doesn't have to have any specific function. Furniture is more difficult than sculpture because it's got to be usable. A well-designed chair is like a piece of sculpture, you see it in three hundred and sixty degrees, and you handle the wood like wood. At the same time, that chair has to present a person in a setting. Like a piece of jewelry, the minute the person sits in the chair there should be some relation in scale, in feeling. There's nothing more funny than a small man in a big upholstered chair, or a big fat person on a spindly little chair.

Tell me what you think about the Italian, Memphis-style furniture. Do you like it?

I think some of it's very funny, but mainly I think it's a waste of material, effort and time. I'd hate like hell to try to live with it.

I'm not sure you do live with it for long, it's this year's fashion, and it dates really quickly.

Yeah, and in that case I'd feel I had wasted my time and materials. I expect my furniture to stay around a long time after I'm gone. It's okay if you can afford it, but whenever you come in, that furniture is going to yell at you, "Hey, I'm over here."

Vertical posts tenoned into the base support the shelves and top of the oval bar shown on the left (walnut, 65 in. high). The back and sides are the same tambour material as the doors, although only the doors slide. Instead of slipping into an entry groove, the door is lifted up into the top groove and dropped into the bottom one. The doors and back of the mahogany cabinet at far right (62 in. high) are conventional frame-and-panel construction. The sides, however, are solid wood, just like the top and bottom, with the panel detail carved in. Says Frid. 'This way they all move together. I got that whole cabinet put of one plank.'



You really want your furniture to lie down and be quiet.

Sure. Look, I live in a house that's close to two hundred years old. It's cozy, it's warm, it's very comfortable. I work in the shop with the machines and noise and dust, so when I come home I don't want anything that will scream at me every time I look at it. That might be fine in a hotel or a vestibule, but in the home to live with, it gives you a very cold feeling. I think it's not very practical, and some of it is even dangerous.

Dangerous?

Well, some of that furniture is very good, too, and of course you should experiment. But for example, one student I knew made a bench with a harpoon coming right out of the back, just

where it could be in a kid's eye. I would hate to have a piece of furniture in my house that I had to put a fence around. Likewise, I don't care for a lot of bentwood furniture, when it looks like the maker is forcing the material to do something it doesn't want to do.

You could argue the other way, though. I mean, people talk about truth to material, and the tree is a branching, curvy, bentwood thing, not flat boards.

Yeah, if you find the curve you want out in the woods someplace. But when you force the wood into curves, right away it looks to me like it doesn't want to do it. And I just like wood, you know, when it is wood. I think if some of those things were



Frid made this walnut bench front a slab of wood he'd sawn and stored more than thirty years ago. He poured rose metal (a pewter-like alloy) to fill the checks around its large knot. He observes, 'There's no way to hide a check like that, so you might as well emphasize it.'



Grandmother clock, left, of walnut with a redwood-burl face (65 in. high), is from Frid's own living room. Says he, 'I wanted to abstract a cat sitting there, face, feet and belly. That's why I made it of wood that's all about the same color. I don't like a clock face looking at me from the corner of the room, shouting the time at me. When I want to know what time it is, I'll look.' The rocking chair with scat of nylon string, below, is a sandwich of walnut glued to both sides of a bandsawn sheet of 1/4-in. thick aluminum. The glue is contact cement, which Frid figures is just flexible enough to permit the dissimilar materials to move in response to heat and humidity.



combined with tubular metal that wants to go around, I think they would be much more beautiful.

So you prefer most of the time to have the wood be wood-colored, and finished close to the way it comes off your tools?

Yeah, I like that. One of my students, he's a college professor now, has a fantastic feeling for wood, and a real good sense for form. But I don't like his current furniture, where he is using a lot of paint on the wood, and we had a father-and-son talk about it. I would introduce some other material instead, so it's part wood and part metal and the two would complement each other.

Do you go so far as to say it's wrong to paint wood?

It's not wrong to paint wood, sometimes I do it, too. Though if you do paint, then you have to remember that the wood underneath won't stand still. You have to design so the movement doesn't make cracks and show. Sometimes things people make out of wood should have been made out of plastic.

Some craftsmen make a lot out of choosing a piece of wood, of finding the one right use for its particular color and figure.

That's just their sales pitch. I see a piece of wood, I think it would be nice for such and such, but I don't have to dramatize it. A lot of people get romantic about their tools, too. I don't care about the tools, I use anything that will get the job done. How a thing is made, I don't care about that either. I'll do it the quickest and strongest way I can. The end result is what counts.

I don't believe that you don't care about your tools or about how a thing is made, I suspect you actually care plenty.

Well, of course I use the best tools I can get. What I'm talking about is people who buy a plane just to kiss it every morning and then plane everything. I get a router bit to do the same thing, and I kiss that. That's what I'm talking about.

But you like good tools?

Oh, absolutely. A chisel that keeps sharp and a plane that planes, of course. But these days, most planes, though they cost enough to buy, are usually concave. And the poor person who buys a tool that doesn't work, he thinks there's something wrong with him. I think it's cheating to sell a tool that doesn't work. A jointer plane ought to be really flat or else it's a reject. I really think these companies are cheating the woodworkers.

The manufacturers say the opposite, that their modern steels are more uniform than the old were.

The best tools are imported from Europe, and they're not first-class either. The same thing with flimsy hardware.

And our wood?

Well, the wood we're using today, the squirrels played in it two, three months ago. We don't take the time to let it cure, settle down and relax. If we would store it for a year or two, that would make a big difference. You have to get ahead on your wood, and people don't want to afford that, nor have the space for it.

Mostly you use native woods.

I don't mind exotic woods, but I think you're a pretty lousy furniture designer if you can't design out of wood in your own backyard. I used to buy trees and take them to the mill, direct the cutting, then take the timber home to dry. I've got a lot of wood now, more than I've got time to use. Lately I've started to like

About Frid



A young Tage Frid, circa 1948.

Tage Frid's unusual life connects the old-world apprenticeship system with the new university education for designer/craftsmen that (in America) has replaced it. Although Frid believes that the apprentice of old was a better woodworker, he also believes that today's graduate is better off for his training in art and design. In an ideal world, Frid would have woodworkers bench-apprentice for two years, study wood technology for two years, and finish with two years in design school. "Then," he says, "they'd really know the whole thing."

Frid was born in Copenhagen in 1915, was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker at age 13, and became a journeyman at 18. During his 20s, he continued university studies toward a degree in interior architecture while working in the cabinet shop of a large hospital. It was there that he learned the most about woodworking, "making things for the doctors, like artificial legs, crutches, canes, office furniture, special furniture—we made everything." And it was at this time in his life that Frid realized he would rather make things he had designed, instead of becoming a designer separated from the workshop.

By 1944, Frid was ready to try something different "A friend told me they

needed woodworkers in Iceland, so the next day I took a one-year leave of absence and bought a ticket to go there. I got off the boat, I was standing on the dock with my tools and my bench, when somebody noticed my tools and asked, 'Hey, are you a woodworker?' I had a job and a place to sleep that first night. Three months later I was made foreman." Not long afterward, he and Emma Jacobsen, whom he had met eight days before leaving for Iceland, were married. Up to that point Frid hadn't given any thought to becoming a teacher. In 1948, a magazine for Danish arts and crafts ran an ad for a woodworking teacher at the School for American Craftsmen in Upstate New York. Frid applied, flew to Denmark for an interview with a school representative, and to his surprise got the job. At age 34, this was to be the major turn in his life.

The first few years were very tough "I'd never taught before the day I walked in," he recalls. "The students kept talking about the freedom of the material, I couldn't wait to find out what they meant, but it turned out they had no control over their material. They were interested in art, not in listening to me talk about construction. And also I had a lot of trouble getting a permanent visa to stay here. It was like three years living with your overcoat on."

In all the turmoil, Frid even lost his tools. "When we first came it was for a short time, so I left my tools in Copenhagen with my mother. She gave them away. She was like that. I remember one day when a beggar came, she fed him. To me he looked familiar; I thought I had met him before. Then I realized he was wearing my suit. She said I'd never used it anyway."

It wasn't long, however, before Frid got his feet planted and began to prosper. By the mid 1950s, in addition to teaching, he was operating an eight-man cabinet shop, was designing on a freelance basis for such firms as George Jensen, and was one of three partners in a retail furniture and accessories gallery. Looking back he says, "I think it's much easier for foreigners to go to a different country and see all the opportunities that the people who live there don't see."

In 1962, following a dispute with the college administration ("they told me I wouldn't get a raise until I began to behave like a professor"), Frid moved from Rochester to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence. Along the way he collected an honorary doctorate, and in 1980 was made a fellow of the American Crafts Council. Characteristically, at the time the honor was awarded, Frid had disagreed with the council's policies and had let his membership lapse.

By starting the country's first college-level program in woodworking and furniture design, Frid became a teacher of teachers, for as the universities filled the void left by the collapse of craft apprenticeships, Frid graduates filled the teaching jobs.

Several years ago, it came time for Frid himself to retire. In searching for his replacement, he decided that RISD would be better with some new blood. He carefully concentrated on people he had not taught, and at the end of an exhaustive search, he hired a talented young craftsman, Seth Stem. It turned out, however, that Stem had been the student of a student of a student of, yup, Frid.

At rock bottom, Frid's teaching can be summarized in a few choice slogans, the distilled essence of 50 years of experience. Wood always moves, always design around the construction, don't murder the wood. I had to wonder how well that lore had weathered transmission unto the fourth generation, during 35 years in the university environment. Not well.

When he arrived at Providence, Stem told me, his master-of-fine-arts degree still new, he'd never bothered about wood movement in widths less than five inches. He didn't design around the construction, but instead, as is the modern way, he'd think up what he wanted to make, then figure out some way to build it. And he loved to bend wood into tortuous curves. As Frid might have predicted, much of the furniture Stem made during graduate school is breaking apart. But now that he's been teaching alongside Frid for several years, Stem has learned his lessons. The old Dane is well pleased. —J.K.

mahogany, it comes in nice widths, there's little waste, it's easy to work with. It's not dead-looking, and not overwhelming either.

So now you're a famous author as well as a craftsman and teacher. What did you think back in 1975 when Paul Roman showed up with his idea for Fine Woodworking magazine?

Can I say it? I thought it was nuts.

So why did you get involved?

Emma talked to me, told me, "Why don't you try it?" I felt, "Here

I can barely speak English, I can't spell, so how can I write?" But I did try it and people liked the way I wrote, so here I am. I try to present a lot of information without being stiff, at least that's what people say they like.

People appreciate your practical approach.

Well, I also try to explain how to fix mistakes. You know, it's very hard for me now, I'm pushing seventy, to change, but I still like to experiment. I'm still learning how to do woodworking a little differently, a little easier. I like that. □