

Richard McCormick Looks Back after Forty Years at the Bench

From Sharp & to the Point

#4-2019



Richard McCormick sits at his bench with a variety of wooden handplanes he's built and has used over the years.

Ron recently received an email from long-time customer Richard McCormick. We were both moved enough by it to share it with you. I know in my heart the email began as a thank you and a desire to connect over the quality of Hock Tools products and what Richard has built in his woodshop. As he wrote, his email developed into a personal reflection on how Richard began woodworking in the '70's, what his choices were as he studied and grew into a fine woodworker, and how he approaches the work today, 40 years after his first moments in his first garage-turned-woodshop. I hope you feel the emotion Ron and I felt reading what began as an email to Ron and became a woodworker's reminiscence and find it as inspiring as we do.

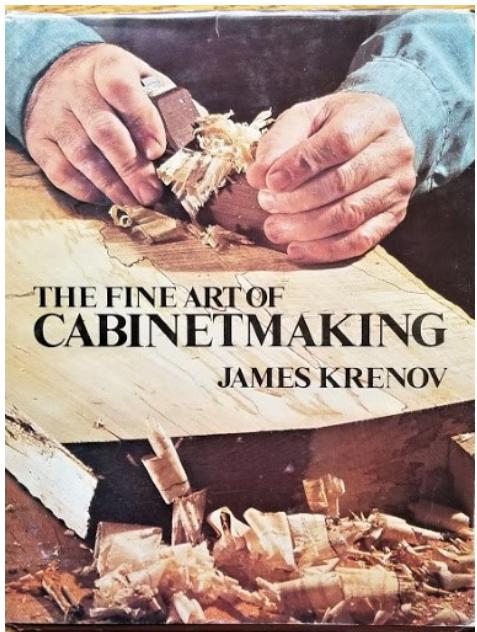
— Linda at Hock Tools

Finding My Path Back to the Beginning

Now entering my forty-sixth year as a woodworker and furniture maker, you would think a man in his early seventies would not have the desire and inclination to look back to find a renewed passion in his work. However, I have done just that.

Like many who embark upon this path of working wood, I can say that James Krenov's early books were profoundly influential in igniting the passion I developed to continue this pursuit.

Krenov seemed to have a near spiritual connection to his craft, and perhaps as much as any aspect of his passion, was his connection to planes. In his book, "The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking," Krenov dedicated twenty pages to explaining how he made wooden planes, stating right up front, "It is not an anybody-can-do-it kind of thing.". In so many words, he cautioned the reader to be deliberate, careful, and cautious when making these planes. He advised those of us who studied every word in his book to listen and feel and be sensitive. "We need to pass a certain point, cross a threshold of discovery where we say, 'Oh that's what it is about. Now I'm beginning to see'" I read quickly through these many pages, as my interest then was not in making wooden planes. I saw the process as slowing me down, in the way of getting to the point, getting something made.



The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking by James Krenov. Lytton Educational Publishing, 1977. Current edition and cover, Linden Book Publishing-Woodworker's Library Series, 2007

The news of James Krenov's death made me sad. In some strange way I felt I owed him something for giving me insights and for inspiring me when I first started out with wood and tools. I remembered how I had started this woodworking path, the mistakes I made, the thrills I had when long labor produced something of beauty. I remembered how naïve I was as I got in over my head so early in the game, believing I could make something that any experienced woodworker would have advised me against. Krenov's words seemed to whisper to me, "go for it with passion in quiet methodical manner".

My first shop in the early seventies consisted of an old Sears radial arm saw, a couple of dull Stanley chisels, along with the usual pliers, screwdrivers, and a hand saw or

two. At center stage was my prized possession – an old Rockwell 4" jointer that I bought for \$50. It was loud and vibrated across the cement floor of my single car garage shop. At one of my early and frequent library visits I came across a black and white photo of a Philadelphia style Chippendale lowboy which was originally produced around 1765. I could not fathom that human hands could possibly have made something so elaborate and beautiful using only simple tools. The small photo depicted the customary ball and claw feet and carved shell with acanthus leaf details.



That first lowboy, now nearly a bonified antique, still stands in our home entryway, a daily reminder to me that (even blind) passion toward an endeavor can lead you through something you might otherwise thought impossible to accomplish. It also reminds me that the most basic tools do help you create fine wooden objects of beauty.



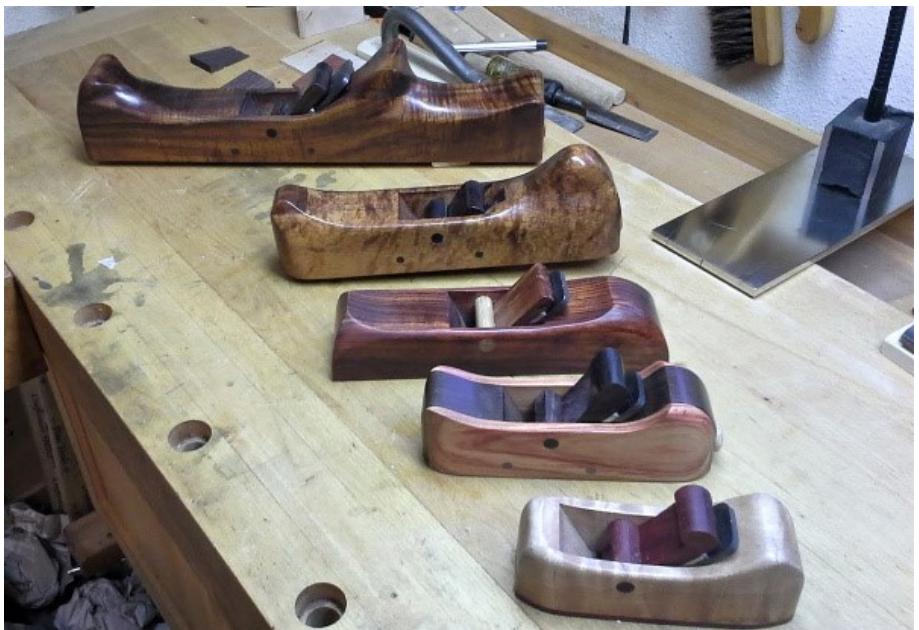
I was too ignorant to know I couldn't make something that ambitious, so I began making a Chippendale lowboy from walnut I had harvested locally and dried. It took three years working mostly nights and weekends. Three years of studying and trying to figure out how they were originally made. How do you shape and carve a cabriole leg? How do you cut fine dovetails? Where do I begin? A valuable lesson was learned in that sometimes, when you don't know you can't, then sometimes you just do it and can. Back then, there was no Fine Woodworking Magazine to tell me the how-and-why of making furniture. I studied, dreamed, read every library book I could get my hands on, and visited museums. Once I

got busted lying on the floor at the Yale University Library attempting to get a glimpse of the underside of a chest!

Throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties I chased after every jig and every latest, greatest, must-have tool in pursuit of efficiency and productivity. – No time for much hand work. No time for slowing down to make and use hand planes. Then suddenly, only a few years ago, something inside me began to stir, or perhaps something began to settle in my soul. I began to grow tired of the noise and dust of machine work, tired of deadlines and commitments in my work. I was not weary from woodworking, but just found myself detached from what had so many years ago brought me to this show in the first place.

Upon Mr. Krenov's passing, and many years since first reading his books, I re-read them cover-to-cover, especially the pages I had skimmed over on making wooden planes. Mr. Krenov had passed on, but he was suddenly alive again for me. That's when my woodworking path changed direction. I made a Krenov style plane, a "smoother" with a Hock blade. I wish I'd taken photos of my progress.

Now, I finally accomplished what James Krenov advised readers to do in his book so many years ago: I had passed to that certain point and crossed a threshold of discovery where I said, "that's what it is about," and I began to see what he said I would see.



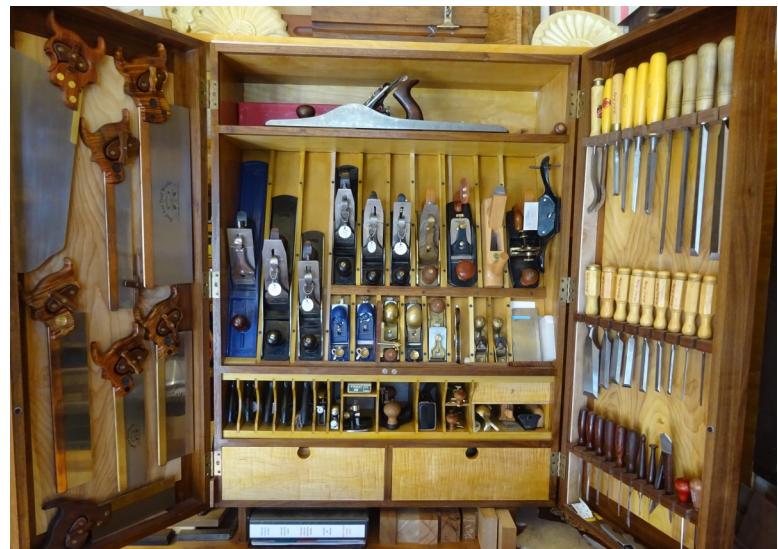
After a day or two of work, the time finally arrived when I pulled a scrap piece of walnut from the pile, fashioned it between the dogs on my bench, and engaged my newly crafted plane to the starting edge. Wow! It glided along the wood effortlessly with the sweetest sound. I was elated, like a kid on Christmas morning.

The experience of making my first plane was near life changing. It led to making another plane, and another. I began studying the history of American and English planes and their makers. I made more planes. Then I became afflicted with the bug I had been warned about - I began collecting vintage antique wooden planes. The bug bit me badly. To date, I've made over two dozen planes that I use in my daily work. And I have acquired well over a hundred older planes.

Many of the planes I have made are Krenov-style and some are the traditional style of eighteenth and nineteenth century planes. I have fitted many of my vintage pre-WWII Stanley



I pulled out my Starrett calipers to check the thickness of the shaving. A little over three thousandths of an inch and not quite uniform from side to side. I fussed a little with the wedge and tapped the iron a bit. Another shaving and another, then a few more little re-tweaks of the iron and wedge. One thousandth of an inch thick and uniform from side to side of one long continuous shaving!



Left and Above: Two shots of Richard's Krenov-style wooden handplanes and other vintage tools in his collection.

and Record bench planes with Hock irons. They sing. Also, I have, with all humility, become an expert at sharpening. I am now confident and comfortable.

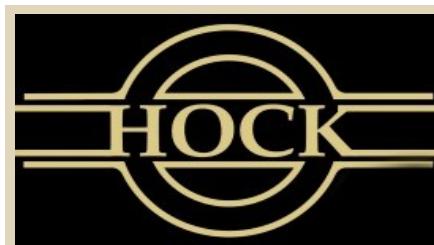
Since embarking on my new “unplugged” path, I now avoid as much machine work as possible and delight in the quiet and peace the sensitive use of hand tools provides.



My most recent project was also the most ambitious in my career as a woodworker, a New England, Rhode Island style secretary bookcase originally made by the Goddard and Townsend families in the 1700s. After decades of yearning to design and craft such a piece, mine was completed last year using hand tools and my self-made wooden handplanes, with as little machine work as possible.

James Krenov might surely be proud to know he played a vital role in starting many woodworkers such as myself on the path of quiet and meaningful woodwork. My testimony is to the fact that it is never too late to find that point, that place of discovery he mentioned in his early book.

— Richard J. McCormick



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