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**Oral history interview with James Krenov, 2004
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with James Krenov on August 12 and 13, 2004. The interview took place in Fort Bragg, California, and was conducted by Oscar Fitzgerald for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

James Krenov and Oscar Fitzgerald have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

OSCAR FITZGERALD: Well, let's start from the beginning. Where were you born?

JAMES KRENOV: Where was I born?

MR. FITZGERALD: We'll start from the beginning.

MR. KRENOV: Well, if you read *Notebook [A Cabinetmaker's Notebook]* by James Krenov, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976] a lot of what you're asking me is in there.

MR. FITZGERALD: So you were born in Wellen in Kamchatka in 1920. Is that correct? And did your parents do any woodwork or anything?

MR. KRENOV: It's a pity that you didn't get all that from *Notebook*, but that's all right. My parents were – how would you call it? Not aristocrats, but they were pretty close to it: people that didn't need to work. And they – my father was sort of an amateur geologist or whatever you might call it. And they made a trip all across Russia and ended up in Petropavlovsk, which is now Vladivostok. And they were having dinner with the governor there and he said, "Oh, by the way, I'm building a school up there and nobody wants to go there," and my mother said, "I do." And so she became the first teacher in that school in Wellen. And the people were Chukchees.

MR. FITZGERALD: How do you spell that?

MR. KRENOV: Chukchee.

MR. FITZGERALD: What did she teach?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, just one of those elementary things with children. You teach a few words of English and she learned a bit of Chukchee, and same as in Alaska. She had a one-room little schoolhouse and all the children piled in there and they went through the alphabet. They went through the numbers from one to 10 and all kinds of things. It was just an ordinary one-room, everybody school.

MR. FITZGERALD: How long did she do that?

MR. KRENOV: I think they were up there for two years.

MR. FITZGERALD: In Kamchatka?

MR. KRENOV: In Wellen.

BRITTA KRENOV: On the ocean.

MR. FITZGERALD: So you were in Siberia until about 1930?

MR. KRENOV: No, no. I was born in 1920, and in '21 or '22 we went to Shanghai. I had a grandfather who lived very well in Shanghai, and we were in Shanghai for a couple of years, and then we came over to the United States. My parents were very well educated, and we came over to Seattle – no, or maybe Vancouver. I don't remember, but it was on the *Empress of Asia*, and my parents got work teaching in Alaska, and we were in Sleetmute, up – 450 miles up the Kuskokwim River.

And we lived there for four years and then we came out and then we went back up again. For three years we lived near Anchorage in a little village [Tyonek] where my parents taught.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did your father teach also?

MR. KRENOV: Well, the combination that is sort of standard is that the woman teaches and the man takes care of the cooperative store and law and order and things like that.

MR. FITZGERALD: So were they working for the U.S. government?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, for the Bureau of Education.

MR. FITZGERALD: And teaching the natives.

MR. KRENOV: Bureau of Indian Affairs.

MR. FITZGERALD: I see. When you were growing up, did you ever tinker around making things or were you interested in making things?

MR. KRENOV: I made things all my life. I made my own toys when I was five or six years old.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did your father have a lot of tools?

MR. KRENOV: Look, you're trying to pin down a basis for my learning. There is no basis for my learning. When I was a small child, I had no one to play with because the Indian kids would say, "I will play with you yesterday morning," and there was nothing in that, so I made my own little boats to sail and things. I've always had good hands. I've always been fairly good at carving little things. I was just a handy, imaginative youngster and I was a very, very good shot. I was a good hunter, too.

So, you know, you'll get a whole book about what the past was, and what I did and didn't do. I don't know if the Smithsonian or anyone else is interested in that. I mean, that's a thing in itself. People say, "Well, you're going to write one more book," and I say, "no," but if I do it's going to be called *Things I Don't Remember*, which is a nice title for a book.

MR. FITZGERALD: What was your first job that you got paid for? A paying job.

MR. KRENOV: During the war, I was an interpreter for Lend Lease, with the Russian ships that came into Seattle.

MR. FITZGERALD: Somewhere I thought I read that you worked in a boatyard in the '30s.

MR. KRENOV: I worked at Jensen Motorboat for a short time.

MR. FITZGERALD: I've always thought that much of your work has curves in it.

MR. KRENOV: Well, boats generally have meant a great deal in my life. I have a good eye for yachts to this day, and Morris Rosenfeld in the days of *Yachting* magazine, before it became a phony, took marvelous photographs of marvelous boats, and I still have my interest for yachting, and we built boats on the beach there by my house that we sailed, you know, on Puget Sound.

But I worked for Jensen Motorboat, yes, and then I became an interpreter for Lend/Lease and provided Russian ships with food and technical supplies for their voyages up through the ice to Murmansk. I was bilingual from childhood, Russian and English.

MR. FITZGERALD: I read that you began making furniture professionally in 1960. Is that correct?

MR. KRENOV: I've never made furniture professionally.

MR. FITZGERALD: Well, that you sold furniture.

MR. KRENOV: Yes. Well, I'm an amateur and I always will be. That's the way I want to die. I'm an amateur by nature and I'm an amateur in fact. And David Pye wrote somewhere that the best work of this century would certainly be done by amateurs.

MR. FITZGERALD: How did you decide to go into furniture making? You studied with Carl Malmsten.

MR. KRENOV: Well, you know. I've had a long life. You're going to end up with a whole book there. I was a pre-Kerouac hippie, and I was working in a factory that made electrical appliances, and I was working at a machine that made coils for Bofors anti-aircraft guns, and the work was killing me. I would get on the bus – it was completely dark, and I would get on this crowded bus, and the paint on the walls of the factory was peeling because of the garlic. It was full of Czechs and Poles – a lot of Poles – and some other people, and they were all refugees from Auschwitz and Belsen and those places, and they were waiting for visas to the United States or Canada or Australia.

And that work was killing me, so I left, and wandered around and – I think this is in *Notebook* too – I saw a place where there were some nice chairs and things in the window and I went in and they told me that part of it was work from the school that Carl Malmsten had, and so I went up to the school and just wouldn't go away. So they let me in just to get rid of me really, and I studied there.

MR. FITZGERALD: How long were you there?

MR. KRENOV: Three years.

MR. FITZGERALD: Three years?

MR. KRENOV: Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: How did he teach? What was his idea?

MR. KRENOV: How did he teach? He liked Waldorf and some of the others. He liked the naturalness about the things that you live with. He was steeped in Swedish country furniture things. He visited [Edward] Barnsley in England. I don't know what the hell else he did. He stuttered and he was

omnipotent. You didn't question Carl, but he had a very fine hand. You know, he drew a curve and filed it and filed it and got it just right. No mechanical devices, no bending things – nothing. I remember I was making a clock that had a carved motif on it and he came and looked over my shoulder. Well, he wasn't there all the time. He had a teacher there, George Bollen, a fellow that made the guitars, but he came and he looked over my shoulder and he said, "Th-th-that ain't g-g-g-good. You got to go out in nature and look at the f-f-f-f-flowers" [stuttering].

So anyway, he was very strict – in one sense he was despotic. In another sense he was a purist in the sense that there was no compromise as to fine workmanship, as to a good eye, good hands – that sort of thing. And he had a number of small four and five-man places out in parts of Sweden where they made the furniture that he designed, and he became a household word, you know. If you had Malmsten in your house, you could invite anybody because Malmsten was Malmsten.

So he'd come over once in a while towards the end. He had these little plus fours in tweed and white hair and glasses and a jacket. And here's this young man making a chair. We worked only from Carl's drawings. We had exercises where we were asked to design a coffee table or whatever, but you would never build it. You just designed it and then it was discussed and if he didn't like it, he'd throw it on the floor and stamp on it.

But anyway, here's this young man making a chair and Carl comes in. He's going to get George and they're going out to lunch, and he stops at this boy and he looks at the chair and he says, "Y-y-you got it wrong. Th-th-that's not right." He goes, gets George, goes out, had lunch, comes back, passes the same boy. "N-n-n-now you got it. That's a lot better." The boy hadn't touched it. So much for the perfect eye, you know, but otherwise he could pick up a millimeter or two that was not the way it should be, and a curve especially – you know, a curve.

And I think that beginning with that I taught myself the most elementary things about a curve that lifts and a curve that is tired and a lot of things – little details. I've always felt that if you're not sensitive to them, there's just no sense – you might as well work in a factory – you know, furniture factory or something.

So to this day I make a shelf and a cabinet and you look at it and it's not tired and the reason is because there's an infinitesimal little rise in a bevel under it, and if you turn it over, it droops – it's tired. But the extent of the curve is a 1/16 or an 1/8 of an inch, but it's there, and you have to believe that even if people do not necessarily notice that particular thing, if they like what you're doing, then they have noticed it without being conscious of it.

Yanagi in his book *The Unknown Craftsman* [*The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*; Kodansha International, 1972] – you haven't read that? You should. The first part of it is extremely important to craft. *The Unknown Craftsman* by Soetsu Yanagi and it was translated by Bernard Leach, who was a very, very renowned potter and visited Japan and became an intimate friend of Yanagi and other people. [Shoji] Hamada – *the* potter.

And the key – well, the book is a nostalgic yearning. The English tried it too; [William] Morris and those people – to keep the shoemaker in the village where he was working, to keep the blacksmith there and not send them into the city. In other words, to preserve crafts in the place of origin and the manner of origin and not mess with them. It was a dream and it never worked, either in England or elsewhere, but the book – to me, the essence of the book is where he says, "Don't be analytical when you look at an object. Perceive – just expose yourself to the object, but don't ask yourself, is this the golden angle? Is this this? Does this counteract that? Does this way go against that? Just expose yourself." And that was the essence of seeing, you know, still is.

They had an exhibition of Japanese lacquer work – absolutely marvelous little objects in lacquer. And later on, the museum of Asian Art published a little catalogue, and I found out that if it was a cylinder – not parallel, it was infinitesimally tapered upward so that when you look down at it, it didn't do like the Pan-Am building [New York City] when they used to show photographs of it. The Pan-Am building in *Time* magazine before that chopper blew up and killed a bunch of people. They don't fly there anymore, but they had a helipad there and the photographs of the Pan-Am were from up above and it just went right at you like that.

But anyhow, the imperceptible little things. I was in Japan. They invited me to a brand new little college up in the mountains and we were taken to a tea-house – restoration of an ancient tea-house that the royal family was connected to. And they were restoring it and the man in charge was a 16th generation temple-builder and he took me to one of the tea-houses in Kyoto – the more modern version. He was making tea-houses and building tea-houses in Kyoto.

And we went, and there was a little tiny skylight, pretty low. I mean, I couldn't reach it, but it was low down – a little rectangular skylight and there was a piece of bamboo through it and I went like that and I went like that and I made his day because what I perceived was that it could not be in the middle of the rectangle. It had to be off just enough in the Japanese way, but not so that it was obvious that that window is bigger than that window. They're not the same and if you notice the difference or feel it, that's what they want. They want you to feel things rather than to necessarily know them.

MR. FITZGERALD: When were you in Japan?

MR. KRENOV: I think it was – what the hell was it? 1990. [Audio break.] There was no room for spontaneity and it was limiting itself because everything had to be done a certain way.

That was before we went to New Zealand.

MR. FITZGERALD: How did you end up teaching at RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology, New York]? How did that come about?

MR. KRENOV: There was an American, Craig McArt – I think that's in *Notebook* too – who studied in Stockholm and he bumped into me and through him I got an invitation from the great man himself, Wendell Castle, to RIT, and here comes this pre-Kerouac hippie with a strange message, but it was not that strange because these were the '70s and the Vietnam thing was going on and people were changing their lives, you know, and here comes this man – not so old – who says you shouldn't be unhappy in your work. Wow, you know. So Craig McArt in Stockholm got an invitation for me to visit RIT, and then I got another invitation and so on. And then Craig and other people would ask, "Well, have you ever thought of writing a book," and I'd say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." Craig McArt came to Stockholm a second time – well, he got married there – and he said, "You sit down and write a book," and I did.

And one of the letters I got – I got many letters, but one of the letters I got was a very short letter from an English historian, maybe like yourself or a critic, who said the book is going to be a classic, and that gave me – helped give me the energy to write the other books that people wanted me to write.

MR. FITZGERALD: Who was that? Do you remember?

MR. KRENOV: In England?

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, no. I've got thousands of letters. God, they're all gone that I get. To this day I get messages on the web from people I have never met, never seen, who are thanking me for something that happened 25 years ago. It never stops. If I had saved them, I'd have – I would have three piles.

MR. FITZGERALD: A huge amount.

MR. KRENOV: Yes, and the basis of the whole thing is that you should not be unhappy in the primary thing that occupies you. And, you know, that motivated a lot of young people, and I remember a guy that called me up when I was in San Francisco and he says, "I'm going to take my airplane and I'm going to fly up there and I want to see you tomorrow for lunch." And his idea was that tomorrow I'm going to change my life. My millions will still be in the bank, but I'll change my life. I'm not going to, you know, do things I don't like. So it's a kind of disease – a healthy disease.

MR. FITZGERALD: Were you working as a cabinetmaker in Sweden before you went to RIT?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, I was not employed, but I – yes, I worked.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you have your own shop?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, yes. A tiny little place in the house where we lived in.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you have anybody working with you?

MR. KRENOV: Pardon? No, no. I've never had anybody helping me. I had four or five young fellows from America and Canada. We played a lot of ping-pong, we skied a little bit, and my own work went down by about 50 percent, but we've been friends ever since. You know, they spent a year with me or something and made tools and fooled around but I would never have anybody employed. No, never.

MR. FITZGERALD: Why is that?

MR. KRENOV: But, you know, I remember people right and left that were getting \$20,000 and \$30,000 from the National Endowment and then they'd fix the floor in their shop and they had what they called an apprentice. Bullshit. He was just doing the dirty work for them and they were not paying him a cent.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: It was just cheap labor. That's all. But the National Endowment would provide that.

MR. FITZGERALD: Would support them.

MR. KRENOV: Wendell and who was the great potter at that time? What was his name? Voulkos.

MR. FITZGERALD: Peter Voulkos.

MR. KRENOV: – and some of those names, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: How did Wendell Castle know of you in Sweden?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, he didn't give a damn about me. He just listened to Craig McArt and got a little bit curious is all.

MR. FITZGERALD: Oh, I see.

MR. KRENOV: He says, "Well, why don't you have the guy come over?"

MR. FITZGERALD: How did you like teaching at RIT?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, it was a mixed bag. You know, at that time Wendell was there and what's his name was there. And they weren't giving each other the time of day. They were supposed to have two days a week each and then Wednesday together and they wouldn't say hello to one another. Bill Keyser.

MR. FITZGERALD: Bill Keyser. I was just thinking of him.

MR. KRENOV: Yes, but don't put those things down. I don't want anything written that mentions these people, you know, because really it's not of any concern.

MR. FITZGERALD: You went over there several different times, isn't that right – to RIT?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, I was there a couple of times and then I – the phone kept ringing in Stockholm at an ungodly hour – 2:00 in the morning – and here was this voice from Boston: "We're going to start the best crafts school in America and I want you over here." And that was Neil Hoffman and he wouldn't let go of me, so finally I went over there and we started the Program in Artisanry in Boston at the Boston University. It was pottery and there was no kiln and it was metalsmith and it was woodworking and I think it was weaving. And the finances were what do they call that?

It was supposed to have generated from Benjamin Franklin, who put 1,000 pounds in a bank in Philadelphia and 100 years later you could put a man on the moon and bring him home with that money, so money was not the problem, but brains sure as hell were, you know. They'd get the engineer up there and say, "Well, we've got to have a kiln for the pot shop." "Yes, well, sure you've got to have a kiln." "I'll tell you what, up on the second floor in the north corner over there is where we ought to put the kilns. There was a pipe-smoking man from the Philadelphia Navy Yard that was supposed to be the – anyway. And then we had a building engineer there." And he'd say, "Yes, well, you can put the kilns over there, but I'll tell you what, about two weeks later you'll find them down in the basement because there is no support in the floor for them. You know, so they'll end up in the basement."

Well, there's a parking space outside the shop – the pot shop. We can get the ordinance changed for big parking and we'll put the kilns out there. Yes, well, you could do that. Yes, yes. But you're going to have to have stacks that are 400 feet high to get the pollution out of – you know, off the streets. Yes, 450 – yes, well. I don't know what they ended up with. I don't remember. Electric something or other anyway, or was it gas, you know.

And then I decided that I would get the hell out of there and we had everybody apply for my job, everybody that was a name, and we had all their portfolios and things – and Jere Osgood and all those guys. I think Jere got the job, and then there was a man – a very interesting man. The Smithsonian I think knows about him, and I think they have something of his: Daniel Jackson.

MR. FITZGERALD: Dan Jackson. I was going to ask you about him.

MR. KRENOV: Yes. He got a job there after me and later on I heard somewhere that he'd been institutionalized – that he'd gone off the deep end and there was a young lady involved and bad things of different kinds. So I don't know anything more than that. I just remember that he came to a very unhappy ending there at Boston University.

MR. FITZGERALD: How long were you involved with the program?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I think I was there a year or something like that. Not long.

MR. FITZGERALD: Why did you leave?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I could see it wasn't going to be *the* school; it was just going to be another school. They didn't have the essence of what it was about, you know. It's a little bit like the school right now – the College of the Redwoods [California], they just don't – you know, they think they're continuing like they always have been, but they're not. They're not.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you go to the College of the Redwoods after that, or did you go back to Sweden?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I knocked around. Hell, I had the books and I had invitations to Japan and New Zealand and I worked where I was and then Van Nostrand Reinhold sent me barnstorming with the books. They sent me to every nook and corner in America, and one of them was Santa Cruz in California.

We did a program at The Cooper Union in New York: 900 people were there that night – 900 people. I spent until about 4:00 in the morning signing books.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you enjoy doing that?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, I enjoyed most of it, although not having a car I was usually stuck between the railroad tracks and the highway and some motel or something, you know, and for better or for worse.

Anyway, I did a song and dance in Santa Cruz and there were a couple fellows from here and they invited Britta and me up for a dinner and a look around and we fell for the place, and there were people in the community that wanted to start a school and they finally got the College of the Redwoods to promote it and built the building because I promised I would come. So they said, "We'll build a school if you'll come." And I said, "I'll come if you build a school." [Laughs.] Back and forth.

MR. FITZGERALD: I understand that the woodshop is separated from the bench room. How did it happen to be where it is?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, well, I don't know. I don't think there's anybody around that remembers just why they got that lot up there, but it's a very nice lot on a bluff and that's where they built the school. And many years later they got the campus and built that other junk out there, but that had nothing to do with us. The College of the Redwoods at that time was a rental here and a rental there and just little places that they had courses.

MR. FITZGERALD: Why did they want to start a school here?

MR. KRENOV: Well, in those days there was much more, as I say, a romantic attitude towards a lot of things and they knew that this fellow had been around the block and was – you know, he wasn't

just a bum. He was an able bum. And they just decided that they wanted to build me a school, so they built me a school.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you enjoy it?

MR. KRENOV: Did I enjoy teaching? In a strenuous way, yes I did very much, or I wouldn't have stayed for 20 years.

MR. FITZGERALD: Were you still able to do your own work at that time?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I had a little corner where I worked days when I wasn't teaching because I had a couple of assistants. I've always worked.

MR. FITZGERALD: When you made things, was it always for a specific person. Did somebody asked you to make it, or did you just make it because you liked to or what?

MR. KRENOV: Mostly I just made what I wanted, and if somebody came to me and asked me to make something, I never – well, practically never – I would say, "Well, yes, well, you know, that kind of interests me. If I ever get more than just interested, I'll call you up." Maybe a year, maybe two or whatever would go by, and I would make something that they wanted. You know, I remember very well all the litigations and things at RIT. You know, Wendell would make something and it'd be up on the ceiling like those lamps that he made over the table and everything would crack apart and he'd say, "Well, I make the stuff. I don't fix it." There was a lot of litigation in those days, mostly against Wendell and some of the stacked pieces that fell apart or cracked – you know, like an old brick wall. They looked newly made. You could run your hand around them – the shapes.

MR. FITZGERALD: And you always used solid wood and maybe veneer, but that's it?

MR. KRENOV: Well, no. I don't just veneer. I worked a lot in solid wood. But with the shop I have and the tiny little saw I had before I got this one a few days ago, I can get more out of a small plank that interests me, that I really feel something for. Veneering – it's very nice once you get through the basic process, then things start happening and you see something take form and so on. I enjoy it.

And we have a lot of veneer work at school with hide glue and a warm table, you know, where you put the zinc plates and you had a press and – yes. That was old-time cabinetmaking then.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you have some strong opinions about the galleries?

MR. KRENOV: About what? Galleries?

MR. FITZGERALD: About galleries in general.

MR. KRENOV: Well, I don't. I have strong opinions about everything. Life and death and everything in between. But I'm a very opinionated person. But, you know, you've got these interior decorators that are getting a few hundred thousand a year and they come into your house and they say, well, yes – and you know, it's going to cost you a fortune to listen to this young lady and she's telling you, "Well, this wall's got to come down. We'll just eliminate this wall and we'll put a skylight up here and a door over here. Yes, I think we'll – that's what we'll do."

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think that the galleries have a role in helping to promote the field?

MR. KRENOV: I think a lot of damage has been done by interior decorators and architects. I remember doing a song and dance down in San Diego at the school of architecture and they were

split right down the middle: the people that still wanted to use wood for floors and things and the people who wanted prefab for everything. They were going at it like mad at each other. And of course the prefabs won because now it's almost nothing out of wood.

The Japanese have come out with bamboo flooring, which is nice, but I mean, you can't cover the world with bamboo flooring.

MR. FITZGERALD: Some craftsmen are even using that. Have you ever heard of anybody actually using it for furniture?

MR. KRENOV: What?

MR. FITZGERALD: Bamboo.

MR. KRENOV: [Audio break, tape change.] Oh well, they're making it in sheeting now too. Yes. Oh, I don't know. It depends on the work you do and how you do it. I mean, I veneer with the wood of my choice. If somebody wants to veneer in bamboo and can get the plates already veneered, that's their business. Somebody made one cabinet out of that bamboo veneer last year and it looked pretty nice. Nothing wrong with it.

MR. FITZGERALD: Has your work appeared in *Fine Woodworking*? I know it has a lot of times.

MR. KRENOV: What "appeared?"

MR. FITZGERALD: Pictures of your work.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, yes. You can talk to Warren and Bebe [Warren Eames Johnson and Bebe Pritam Johnson, owner of Pritam & Eames Gallery, East Hampton, New York] and ask them more about that. They'll give you a lot of information that's relevant, you know. She's rather interesting actually.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think that they've done a good job?

MR. KRENOV: Well, they were less artsy for a while, and after Peter Joseph [Peter Joseph Gallery, New York City] closed down, they became *the* gallery, you know. And I won't say that they're uppity, but a little more art, you know. Brian Newell and some of the others and that woman that does lions and things and chairs and all.

MR. FITZGERALD: Oh, Judy McKie?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, and the Polynesian carvings woman.

MR. FITZGERALD: Kristina Madsen?

MR. KRENOV: You know, I had some hopes when they established the Furniture Society they gave me one of the first awards – it was the ugliest thing that I've ever seen in my life – craftsmanship – this new society. Horrible. It's just that they are so self-engrossed, you know. I had this marvelous vision of this chair that I was going to make and it had such a significance for my soul, you know. And you look at it and it's the ugliest damn thing you've ever seen. I thought they were going to stand for durable values and mild aesthetics and then gradually they have evolved into anything goes as long as you're happy doing it. And there's some truth in that. I mean, you know, if I start pounding nails into this thing and I have fun doing it, what the hell.

But, you know, there is really no one who is keeping track of the few people who keep on in a way that David Pye would, and Yanagi and some other people would approve of, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: Who would you put in that category that – do you know Art Carpenter?

MR. KRENOV: I know “Artsy” [Art] Carpenter, yes. California round edge – everything looks like it comes from a doughnut shop.

MR. FITZGERALD: Who do you think is continuing in the craft tradition?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, well, I don't know, off the top of my head, we've had a lot of talented people and I get letters and telephone calls. They're all over America and the world now, and they're doing fine work and managing to live. [Timothy] Coleman back east, and, oh, a lot of guys. Hell, I can't remember all of them right away like that.

MR. FITZGERALD: Was he one of your students? Coleman?

MR. KRENOV: Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: How many students did you usually have a year.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, we had 21.

MR. FITZGERALD: Twenty-one?

MR. KRENOV: Yes. Now it's 22 I think.

MR. FITZGERALD: Is it a two-year program?

MR. KRENOV: A one-year program with an option to apply for a second year. We'd select five or six for a second year.

Yes, so it was essentially a one-year program, but quite a few students did a second year.

MR. FITZGERALD: Who would you say were some of your most outstanding students? You mentioned Brian Newell.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, God. I'm horrible when it comes to names. I'd recognize them and tell you about them, but I –

MR. FITZGERALD: I have the same problem, so I can appreciate that.

MR. KRENOV: Look in *Who's Who*. They're there.

MR. FITZGERALD: What did you advise them? When you were advising the students on how to make a living at this, what would you tell them? How to sell – how would they sell their furniture?

MR. KRENOV: Well, my standard formula was the better work you do, the more chance that you'll starve.

MR. FITZGERALD: Really?

MR. KRENOV: It's an inverse proportion. If you do wonderful work, you're going to have a hell of a

time. You're a wonderful student. You're talented, but you're just going to have one hell of a time.

MR. FITZGERALD: So –

MR. KRENOV: And we always had a few that would say, “Well, I’ll knock out a this” or “I’ll knock out a table” or whatever. They came for various reasons.

MR. FITZGERALD: What different motivations were there?

MR. KRENOV: Motivations?

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes, why would they come?

MR. KRENOV: Well, by then the books were out and certainly the vast majority of applicants that we had were people who were caught by the message of *Notebook* and the others. Definitely. I don't know if that's still the case or not, but at that time it was definitely that.

MR. FITZGERALD: It's – how many books have you published? How many books do you think you have sold?

MR. KRENOV: Five I think.

MR. FITZGERALD: But I mean copies of them.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, God, I haven't the faintest idea. I haven't the faintest idea.

MS. KRENOV: How many copies?

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: It doesn't matter. Honestly not.

MS. KRENOV: They sold quite a bit.

MR. FITZGERALD: Oh, 100,000 or something like that?

MS. KRENOV: I should think so, yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes. Well, you've influenced a lot of people.

MR. KRENOV: Jon Binzen wrote in the back of that book that he – he's got a book – what's the name of that? Do you know Jon? Oh, I think this is it. Yes. The person doing home furniture. The magazine that went broke.

MR. FITZGERALD: Which one was that?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, they went out of business a couple of years ago. They were the only good magazine. *Fine Woodworking* was. But anyway, he mentions, but he doesn't give any – it's in here somewhere. Anyway, be sure and get that book. It'll give you a lot about the people that are still around and what they're doing and so on.

MR. FITZGERALD: All right. Were you influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement?

MR. KRENOV: I wasn't influenced by anything except maybe Malmsten to a certain extent, with gentle lines and soft edges and so on. You'd be making a table and George would come over – the one that made guitars and taught there.

MR. FITZGERALD: And taught at Malmsten's school?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, at the school. And he would look at your table and he would run his hand around it and he would come to the corner, and he'd stand there a while doing this [rubs his hands together] and he wouldn't say another word. He just walked off. And you'd spend the rest of the day wondering what the hell it was about that particular corner that his hand discovered.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: That's teaching. So there was a lot of feel and Malmsten furniture was made to be used. There were no harsh hand-rests. There were no angles that would hurt you. It was highly usable and very Swedish.

[Audio break.]

MR. FITZGERALD: All right. This is tape two of an interview with James Krenov by Oscar Fitzgerald in Fort Bragg [California], on the 12th of August, 2004.

All right. We were talking about –

MR. KRENOV: So where were we?

MR. FITZGERALD: You had described very nicely when we were in the shop how you evolved your designs. Could you go through that again? When you start to make a piece of furniture, what do you do?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I think that in anything that I do or have done, you know, they joked a lot about me and wood. It's important to me – the kind of wood– there is always a physical connection of work depending on the kind of wood that you choose, whether it's rolled or not or – you know, all these things. And the color and texture. The way it ages – all these things.

So always I have, you know, kept and tried to get as much really fine wood as I could and a simple idea – I think I'll make a showcase. Well, a showcase is – too much glass makes an aquarium and not enough glass makes it dark inside. So, you know, I evolved what I thought were fairly balanced objects, whether it was a music stand – there's one of my music stands in a museum in Norway – Nordenfjeldske Museum [Trondheim, Norway]. Nordenfjeldske Museum. They've got some lovely things there – some Art Nouveau stuff.

Anyway – and the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. So I've just always had a kind of a triangular relationship between me, the wood, and the kind of work that would be involved in the object of my choice – a lot of planing, no planing, a lot of scraping, no scraping, a little scraping – all these things. I think of the object and of the various processes that are going to be involved in making it, and if the processes don't appeal to me, I'm not going to do it. So I have to feel good about what I'm doing.

MR. FITZGERALD: So somebody tells you they would like a CD cabinet or something, you'd say, "I'm not interested in doing that?"

MR. KRENOV: Well, not necessarily. I mean, I, you know, always try to be congenial and polite and so

on, but I can certainly say to you that – “Let’s wait and see. When I get the right wood, I’ll call you.” But sometimes – a few times – I had a friend in Stockholm who had a number of my things and we would come to a preliminary agreement. He wanted a little writing table with a tilting top, and the edge would have to have a lip on it so that the paper wouldn’t go sailing, you know. [Laughs.]

And I made a chess table. I don’t play chess, but the first chess table I made was – I talked to people who played chess, among others, my friends, you know, and the height, the amount of surface that would be enough for the clock and a drink. And I’d seen a lot of veneered tables – the old-fashioned ones, you know, that were – what were they? They were leather – green leather for cards. And then on the other side, if you opened up the table, was a chess board, and inside was the backgammon. So it was a three-game table. But I didn’t want to do that. I just made a chess table.

MR. FITZGERALD: Where do you get your wood?

MR. KRENOV: Pardon?

MR. FITZGERALD: Where do you get your wood?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, in those days there were several small businesses that were just barely hanging on and they had some wood that were left over from ancient times, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: This was in Sweden?

MR. KRENOV: Yes. Yes. I got what I could find, and some of it was wonderful.

MR. FITZGERALD: Have you ever used redwood much?

MR. KRENOV: No. No. I’ve seen some wonderful redwood, but I just didn’t – maybe I will. Who knows?

MR. FITZGERALD: What’s your favorite wood?

MR. KRENOV: Hmm?

MR. FITZGERALD: What’s your favorite wood?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I have no favorite wood. If it’s real nice, it could be anything really.

MR. FITZGERALD: You fit the wood to match the job, or do you select the wood first?

MR. KRENOV: They grow together. Everything grows together.

MR. FITZGERALD: What kind of –

MR. KRENOV: You close your eyes and you think, well, if the table’s all black that’s no good. And if it’s all white, like maple or something, that’s no good. What else have we got? We’ve got mahogany, we’ve got oak, we’ve got this and that and the other thing. Search and hope and find something that finally commits you to feel, well, yes, it would look nice – the chair would look nice in this wood, and it would work well. It glues well, and the pieces I have are dry and fine. Yes, I think I’ll do it that way.

MR. FITZGERALD: You said that the wood suggests the shape of the furniture in some cases.

MR. KRENOV: Well, not necessarily the exact *shape*. My goodness, no; but it suggests the way of working and it gives you a sense of color and texture. The chair, if you finish it, will be, you know, gray-black and have open pores and so on.

MR. FITZGERALD: What kind of finish do you like to put on it?

MR. KRENOV: As little as possible. Polish sometimes.

MR. FITZGERALD: Just wax?

MR. KRENOV: Quite often polish. Wax, too, but there are different waxes. There's renaissance wax that doesn't color the wood, and then there are waxes like I showed you out in the shop that warm the wood. And then you gradually develop a feeling of what time will do to the piece. I mean, that's Andaman padouk in those panels back there. Bright red. If you pull out a drawer, you see how bright red it was, and 20 years under the skylight with the sun shining on it has done that to it. It looks like old walnut – the whole thing.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think about how it's going to age?

MR. KRENOV: Well, of course. Any responsible person does, or should.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you ever use shellac?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, but polish *is* shellac, but it's not brushed shellac. It's water thinned like this. [Points to table.] It looks quite a bit like that, too.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you ever use lacquer?

MR. KRENOV: No. There were students at the school who used it. Now and then somebody would use lacquer; usually they'd have trouble. Well, in olden times they used mostly polish.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes. Where do you get your hardware? Do you make your own hardware for handles and hinges?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, no. I brought over some little hinges and things from Sweden that are now made in America. Brusso [Brusso Precision Hardware] makes a hinge, but it's lousy. I talked to them. I said, "I don't want to have to read a newspaper between the way the door fits in there, you know. Get that washer thin." They don't care. They say, "We make 10,000 of them and we're not going to listen to you, old man." So that's all right. But we've got somebody that makes beautiful hinges.

MR. FITZGERALD: Is it a commercial operation?

MR. KRENOV: Hmm?

MR. FITZGERALD: Are they easily available?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, but he doesn't make many. He's not a factory.

MR. FITZGERALD: You mentioned that you make a lot of your tools. Do you like making them?

MR. KRENOV: Well, no. I know a good knife when I see it and feel it and how it is in my hand and

what I can do with it. A lot of people don't know what a knife is about, but, you know, over the years I've gathered a few very nice chisels and some Japanese saws and –

MR. FITZGERALD: Why do you like the Japanese saw? Do you like the Japanese saws better than the Western ones?

MR. KRENOV: When I was at John Makepeace's, they had the regular English saw, which is a push saw.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: But I like the Japanese.

MR. FITZGERALD: You pull –

MR. KRENOV: I didn't at one time, but during the last 20 years I've grown fond of them. Properly used, they're very fine.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you teach in John Makepeace's school [The School for Craftsmen in Wood (later known as Parnham College) in Dorset, England]?

MR. KRENOV: I spent two weeks there, or three. I don't remember. Yes, he had a dog that was about from that corner to that door – a Russian wolfhound. He had a guy with a ponytail in the shop – his own shop, who was, and probably still is, an excellent cabinetmaker. He did those chairs with the woven silver thread in them, you know, but they get those shapes – just when I visited him nearly 20 years ago, they get those shapes with just particleboard forms and hand clamps, but what they do is that they buy a whole package of veneer in sequence – thin veneer – commercial veneer, and they get it thick enough that they can bend it any way they want.

MR. FITZGERALD: I see.

MR. KRENOV: So it looks for all purposes as a solid, but it's not. It's very thin layers. The thinner the layer, the sharper the curve, so you know, if they were this thin, you could do anything you want.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you like his work?

MR. KRENOV: I haven't seen enough of it to form an opinion. I was impressed by the chairs. I thought that particular throne chair was nice, but a lot, most of the work that he did was for corporations – big-time business, and there was very little intimacy in it. It was, you know, a showpiece – a ten-foot table and 10 chairs and the whole thing.

And then he did that experimental place: Hooke Park it's called. It's very strange. It's like a circus with computerized shapers and things. It seemed incongruous.

MR. FITZGERALD: You said that you felt that computer control – computer design and computer controlled machinery is really having a bad effect on the field. What is your thought on that?

MR. KRENOV: Well, the Danes were the first to perfect the technique of shapers and templates before computers. [Hans] Wegner and some of the others. I had a little show in Denmark once – in Copenhagen, and I had the honor of dining with Wegner and some of the others, and I visited his shop and what they were able to do – they could design one of his chairs and get everything off the shaper ready to glue up. Glued it up, sanded a little, sprayed it with lacquer, and that's a Wegner

chair. But they were the first ones to really discover the potential of the shaper and, you know, later on it's computerized and so on, but early on it was just templates.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes. What do you think is lost when you do that?

MR. KRENOV: Pardon?

MR. FITZGERALD: What's lost?

MR. KRENOV: Well, that's a good question. What is lost? The intimacy of course. The presence of tools and so on, but they sort of come together, you know, to where it's hard to differentiate between something that you've done with a great deal of heart and soul and skill and something that's been made and they're side by side. It's really hard. You can do fine things in a commercial way. Mostly they don't. They make garbage, but it is possible to do very refined work commercially.

MR. FITZGERALD: You were describing when making a cabinet out in your shop that had a very slight, gentle, almost imperceptible curve.

MR. KRENOV: Well, you come to a point where if the object has some diversity in it, you know, the presence of the hand and eye become more and more important. So it would be probably commercially stupid to try to get that little tiny shape in there, whereas to me it's not stupid at all.

MR. FITZGERALD: When you first started out, did you draw plans for your work?

MR. KRENOV: No, like I said, I doodled and then I made my own scale, you know, but a lot of things were a combination of a small sketch and just going to the work and doing.

MR. FITZGERALD: You did that from the very beginning, then. I've talked to a number of craftsmen and some of them started out doing detailed drawings.

MR. KRENOV: Well, when we did Carl's things at school, it was always right off the drawings and they had to be exact. No messing around with the drawing. You got your drawing of that table and you're going to make it and it's going to be looked at, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: So did you get away from that pretty quickly after you got out of the school?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I wasn't any longer dependent upon your design and me making what you had drawn.

MR. FITZGERALD: And you were describing out in your shop the way that you proportion things. Could you go over that again?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I think we have to go back to Yanagi and just the feeling that you look at that box and you think to yourself, well, if that was, you know, that wood and those colors and things, that would be pretty close to the proportion I'm looking for. And I usually veneer up my surfaces with a little edge gluing inside under the veneer, or all the way around. It's easier to work later – you don't have the ply – and also it gives you the chance to trim it down a little bit later if you need to and still be within the boundaries of that little edge gluing.

So almost until the last there is that little margin you can take, and sometimes it's amazing what five millimeters will do. You know, you're pretty close, but you're not that close and you take a little here and a little there and yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: And you were saying that you really don't like the scraper generally, unless it's a hard wood.

MR. KRENOV: Well, I don't hate it.

MR. FITZGERALD: I mean a scraper. A scraper.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, well, but I said at the time that on certain very hard woods it's fine, and it depends on how skillful you are in, you know, giving it an edge and –

MR. FITZGERALD: With the planer?

MR. KRENOV: Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: And I notice that you've made several of your planes out there. Were they out of rosewood?

MR. KRENOV: No, no. Just something real hard that will wear well. Rosewood is really not hard. It doesn't stand abrasion very well. Other woods do. You know, it'll wear a long time, so that's much more important than it's a beautiful plane out of cocobolo and cocobolo will wear very fast.

MR. FITZGERALD: Could you talk about some of your most challenging pieces that you've done?

MR. KRENOV: About what?

MR. FITZGERALD: Your most challenging projects. What would be the hardest ones or the most challenging ones that you've done?

MR. KRENOV: I don't know.

MR. FITZGERALD: Or maybe ones that you're most proud of.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, well, I could never finish anything that I'd be ashamed of or embarrassed by, so that gives me a pretty good margin to be just simply unpretentiously pleased, you know. A graphic artist, if he does or she does something and then they don't like it, they just take and tear it up and throw it away and start all over again, but they don't keep or sell something that they aren't happy with.

MR. FITZGERALD: What is, what would you say is your favorite piece that you've made?

MR. KRENOV: Well, in one of the books there is a showcase cabinet with a body underneath and it's out of an Asian wood. That's one of my favorites. I've done a couple things here in this little shop that are favorites. I made a cabinet for a man in Australia that I like, and the cabinet that Brian Newell stole was very nice, too. So you know, I stay away from things that don't turn out.

And the fact that I like it is not predominant. I mean, it's not like if I like it, everybody has to like it. So, you know, be careful. But if somebody walks into the shop and lights up and says, "Wow, that's lovely!" That means a lot to me, especially if it's the right person.

MR. FITZGERALD: Have you had anybody ever not like anything you did?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I don't know. They must have been pretty discreet about it because I don't remember. [Laughs.]

MR. FITZGERALD: I can't imagine they wouldn't. I know I'm kind of jumping around here a little bit, but you know they make such a big deal about the Asilomar Conference [Pacific Grove, California] back in the 1950s.

MR. KRENOV: I shy away from those. When they gave me that award from the [Furniture] Society, I didn't go. I sent one of my assistants over and he got it, and it was the ugliest artist's attempt to stylize a plane. They'd taken a block of wood and sawn it like that and it had a piece of brass on this side and a piece of brass on that side and an inscription there. I put it in the dumpster and I think somebody took it out of the dumpster and they've got it somewhere. I don't know. But anyhow, it was terrible and I thought, God, if this is the way they're going to be, heaven help us.

MR. FITZGERALD: Have you ever gotten an award that you really treasure? What recognition have you most treasured?

MR. KRENOV: Well, they called me up from England 12 or more years ago and they said, "If you pay your fare, we'll give you a medal." And I was the first non-Englishman to get the William Morris award, so I went to England and had a good time and got the award. It's in the shop over there. That means a lot to me.

MR. FITZGERALD: What organization was that?

MR. KRENOV: The British Craft Guild I think. I think so, yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: That'd be the British Crafts Council.

MR. KRENOV: Yes. And it was some minister or who the hell was he? Somebody very important gave me the medal personally. It was fun. Yes, I did a little song and dance for them.

MR. FITZGERALD: You said you had traveled to New Zealand. What were you doing there?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, they invited me down there, and I did small workshops in several places, on the north island and the south island.

MR. FITZGERALD: Have you taught at Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina] or Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee] or any of those places?

MR. KRENOV: No. I've been to Aspen a couple of times.

MR. FITZGERALD: To Anderson Ranch [Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado]?

MR. KRENOV: Penland and Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine] and all those places, no.

MR. FITZGERALD: Anderson Ranch?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, I've been there a couple three times.

MR. FITZGERALD: What do you think of those programs?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, it's once over lightly; have a good time.

MR. FITZGERALD: So it's not really very serious?

MR. KRENOV: No. I mean, the duration is such that you learn the alphabet, but you haven't got time to learn spelling or grammar or anything else, but you know the alphabet, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: How long do you think it takes to really develop your skills? Does it vary from person to person?

MR. KRENOV: Well, it's a slow progression. I don't think that other than the general use of tools and kinds of wood and safe use of machines and so on – you know, the elementary things. Some people have a very sensitive intuition and sense of proportion and line and other people never will. You could have them for 20 years as a student and they still won't. Unfortunately, the guy left at the school just doesn't have any talent.

But anyway, I don't think that you can. For example, you cannot teach a person to be musical. You can teach them to play, but you can't teach them to be musical. I was in New York and I came back to my hotel room and they were having the 80th birthday concert by [Arthur] Rubinstein – Carnegie Hall, the whole ball of wax. And they were interviewing him in the intermission and somebody asked him about the contemporary students – about the students of that time. He says, "Oh, such technicians, such skills. Oh, sometimes I ask one of them, when are you going to make music?"

MR. FITZGERALD: [Laughs.] Yes, so you think that it really should be an intuitive process?

MR. KRENOV: It's an innate something that you have in you. Probably if you're very musical, you also are a good mathematician. There's a very sad story by one of the authors about a young man had both talents. Anyway –

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think you had a sort of a unique gift that you got from your genes, so to speak?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I don't know, really. I mean, I come from a very cultured, highly-educated family, and my mother used to be sent to Paris every winter to see [Sergei] Diaghilev and Sarah Bernhardt and get her wardrobe at Chanel's. Chanel was not just a market name, it was a bel etage of no name on the door and if you were somebody, maybe they would make, you know, clothing for you.

So I was weaned on that and then I had the privilege of these native cultures – native environments. It's not that they made refined things, but the whole presence of the – I don't know, an aura, you know, that you soaked up of directness and honesty and the combination of what the object is and the use of it. You know, that it was not only beautiful to look at, it was great to hold and use. And then I – I'm pretty metaphysical, you know. I was brought up on legends – indian legends with reincarnation, you know. The wolverine is very clever and the bear is very strong and the fox is very foxy and so on – wonderful stories. So I'm very sensitive to things that shouldn't be explained too much. We destroy a lot of meaning by analyzing it, and explaining it scientifically when we should leave it alone for what it's worth. You know, like the Australian aborigines and other people.

There used to be a wonderful children's book called *Dream Time* – an Australian book for children. I lent it to somebody and they never returned it. But, you know, I don't like seeing them doing their so-called traditional dances in Nike sweaters and this kind of shoes out there in the jungle doing their ancient dances.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: And I saw it in Alaska too. You know, scooters, snowmobiles, radios, television – the whole thing. And it's all right, but don't pretend that it's authentic. It's not. It's the pretense that gets me, you know. You lose the genuine and you think that you've got something to make up for it and you just can't do it. You're better off letting go.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think you've been able to pass those ideas on to at least some of your students?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, yes. Wednesdays – they love Wednesdays because then I would just ramble, you know. All kinds of things. I'd just talk about anything. Very often, it was music or literature. I read to them from Exupéry's [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry] *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. You know, that marvelous book. And [Joseph] Conrad, and I'd tell them stories and joke with them and we had good times. We had good times.

MR. FITZGERALD: Could you talk about typically how you would teach? Your philosophy of teaching? It sounds very much like Carl Malmsten was very influential –

MR. KRENOV: No, no. He wasn't that romantic. And he didn't joke. No, there's a world of difference. But I don't know; I just enjoyed helping them to see a little better and respect certain things and kind of a humorous reverence, if the two go together. I don't know.

Yes, and I'd tell them they're running the America's Cup races. You watch those sails. You watch the shape of those masts and sails when they take the photo from the chopper, you know, down on the yacht and she's over like that and the sail is just in a perfect airfoil, you know.

They couldn't quite do that in the days of canvas, but now with the synthetic materials they can make a sail for every kind of wind and the mast is never quite straight. It's always a little bit bent. And in 1932 at the Olympics they had the international star boat race. Do you know what a star boat is? It's a 22-foot classic. It defies time. And that was Hitler and the whole thing there and there was a German by the name of von Hutschler who was the first to come up with a mast that you could bend. You could turn a screw at the deck and force the mast into a – and he was the only man to win all five races in the star boat class at the Olympics. After that, flexible rigs became standard.

But I would tell them – you know, joke with them and things, you know. There were these guys building a house and they're a little bit – you know, a little bit different. And one of them comes up to the foreman and he says – “Listen,” he says, “We've got to know. Are we supposed to build from the ground up or from up down?” “You idiot, you're supposed to build from the ground up.” “Hey guys, tear it down. We got to start all over again.”

MR. FITZGERALD: [Laughs.] Where'd you hear all these jokes? Just collect them?

MR. KRENOV: A long life. I didn't get much done tomorrow, but we'll sure give them hell tomorrow.

MR. FITZGERALD: Where do you think the field of furniture – fine furniture is going? Are you happy with the trends or not?

MR. KRENOV: Well, it's gone the way of art, and art is anything that you call art nowadays.

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: There was a time when there was a stricter definition. There were boundaries. Now,

because it's ludicrous enough and ugly enough, it's instant art, so, you know, I think that what has happened is just an abyss between the one and the other. And the public and the computers and the decorators and the architects are on this side, and a few poor devils are trying to say that certain values still pertain and there is such a thing as good taste and bad taste. And this side says, "Oh, to hell with that."

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: So you're up against that and you can't fight it and you don't want to join it, so you go and hide someplace.

MR. FITZGERALD: What are your thoughts about the American Craft Council?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I knew Lois Moran when she was a librarian at the Craft Council. She saved me once because I called – well, I went to Abrams [Harry N. Abrams Publishing] with *Notebook* and they kind of put it on the scale and said it wasn't heavy enough, but they liked it. And then I was given the name of somebody at Van Nostrand Reinhold and I called him up, and he was talking all the time about the price of the book and the money, and I wanted him to say, "It's a nice book." So I hung up on him. I've done that a few times in my life. I hung up on him.

And later on, it occurred to me, my God, what did you do? You know. And I went to Lois Moran – I hung around New York once upon a time, and I went to Lois Moran and she said, "Oh, he's probably forgotten all about it. Call him up again." I did, and it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, like in Casablanca, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: How did you learn to write so well? I've read your books and they're just lyrical.

MR. KRENOV: Well, it's a spoken word. It's not the written word, it's the spoken word. I'm not an author. I could not create a character or recreate a character or write a dialogue or describe. Well, I could describe things, but I'm not an author. I write the spoken word.

[Audio break.]

MR. FITZGERALD: This is the second session [tape three] with James Krenov, conducted by Oscar Fitzgerald in Fort Bragg [California] and it's August 13, 2004.

And the thing I'd like to start out with is to talk to you a little bit about your furniture. You had said that you liked small scale furniture.

MR. KRENOV: Well, if I make a dinner table for somebody, it's not going to be a miniature, but I like to make smaller, neat things because they don't clutter the shop. They give me a chance to use my hands on small things. Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: What are your favorite types of furniture?

MR. KRENOV: I have no favorites. I like to make cabinets because there are very few really nice cabinets around. There are a lot of chairs, a lot of tables, a lot of nonsense, but cabinets as I perceive them are neglected. They are not evident as seating furniture and so on are. So somewhere along the line, I just seemed to feel that it would be nice to fill that vacuum. You know, to make something that few people make. I didn't want to make what everybody was making. I never have.

MR. FITZGERALD: Are they mostly used as display cabinets?

MR. KRENOV: But they're not miniatures, you know. They're usable and above all the purpose of that little thing is simply to please you and me and whoever. That's the function. The function – people are always looking for. Well, what's it for? Well, what if it's just simply for you to admire and live with and not get tired of over the years, and keep? You know.

And we've had that Japanese fellow's painting there for 30 years or so [pointing to a picture on the wall], and we like it just like we did when we first met him in Stockholm. It's faded a little, but – so, you know, I regard pleasure as a function because if a thing is pleasant, that's a function. If the chair is nice looking, but you can't sit in it, you've not completed the function because chairs are primarily to sit in. But a cabinet up there or a cabinet over there is not to be necessarily used, as admired and enjoyed. That's a legitimate function, so, you know, I think other people regard, you know, their work, whether it's sculpture or pottery or weaving in the same way. You can weave something and it's not going to be on the floor. People aren't going to, you know, use it. They're going to admire it. Maybe they'll put it up in the wall – a little tiny Chinese carpet, you know.

I had a friend in Stockholm who about 40 years ago used to write very discrete and polite letters to China, and he would write a letter and time would pass and pass and then he'd get a little package from China and it was one of those beautiful little carpets that are probably manufactured now, but at that time they were, you know, handmade special little things and he would have them.

So pleasure, enjoyment, is a legitimate function and sculptures and pottery that you don't use, but that you simply get pleasure from, fulfills its function.

MR. FITZGERALD: Would you rather people came to you and asked for a cabinet, or would you like them to say, "Well, I want a cabinet to show my whatever," you know. Do you want them to tell you the function, or do you just want to make it for them to enjoy?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I make things simply to keep working, and because I enjoy the process of doing something, and when it is an expression of what I see and feel, so much the better. And who gets it is incidental. You know, I don't pile them up back there in the woods someplace. People want them. And that completes the circle, you know. I've never really – well, I won't say I haven't enjoyed it. I have. You know, the fact that you or someone comes to me and says, "Will you make a little cabinet for me?" will always please me, you know. If it didn't, there'd be something wrong with me. There are a lot of things wrong with me, but that's not one of them.

So, you know, there's a balance in all that. I think that Hamada and Bernard Leach – Bernard Leach basically just made classical pottery that dated back to the Greeks and whoever – Phoenicians or whoever, you know. He didn't worry about new glazes and political expressions on the pots and – you know, like in the '70s it wasn't complete unless you had a Vietnam protest or something on it or some kind of a symbol that nobody could read.

He just made classical pottery, and I have some little quotes. I'll try to pull them out before you leave. They're very good. One is by Leach. He was a very – he was *the* potter in England for a long time and he wrote that book together with Yanagi – *The Unknown Craftsman*. So, you know, there are people who have worked through the ages, that have worked out of resentment or opposition. They've made things to prove a point, to create a political statement. You know, for various reasons like that.

But I don't adhere to that and so you have the other category, which is simply I am a shoemaker. I

make shoes that fit well and wear well and people keep coming back to me and saying, "Will you make me another pair of those shoes? My foot's changed a little bit." "Well, that's all right. I'll take that into account when I make the shoe. Your left toe is a little bit crooked now, so we'll just – you know, we'll make the shoe so it will be comfortable when you wear it." That's it.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think you could have been happy making something else? Doing pottery for example?

MR. KRENOV: Well, God knows. I mean, that's not something I dwell on or can answer. I can't answer it. Why am I not a fisherman or an airplane pilot or a whatever. No, that's out of the realm, you know. It's not a question.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you ever wish that you had been something else or have you always been happy doing this?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I think that in all honesty momentarily or temporarily one has secret wishes. Why wasn't I, you know, this or that? But they're not deep regrets. They're not something that gets in the way of the present. You know, they're just thoughts.

MR. FITZGERALD: In the shop yesterday, you were showing me your dovetails that sort of had the blunt points –

MR. KRENOV: That wasn't mine. I was showing you one that that fellow made. A lot of them he did. And I didn't share his pride in the fact that they broke off and had to be repaired, you know, so I just shook my head, but that was enough to antagonize him for all future years. I think that that's petty and cheap, but, you know, let's not talk about it.

MR. FITZGERALD: Well, do you –

MR. KRENOV: There is a plant stand up at the school one of my Japanese friends gave us that has absolutely physically impossible joints, but someone has made them to prove that a human being can do those joints, you know. And I met him in Japan and it was his father that had made some boxes with those joints, but they defy gravity, they defy grain, they defy common sense, but it proves that you can create that pattern with those joints and do it. And the nature of the joints is such that you can never put them together and take them apart. You put them together once and probably it's on the diagonal. You can't put them straight in. You've got to bring them together like that.

What does it prove? It proves that I can do something that you don't believe that anybody can do, and maybe nobody else would care to do. So, you know, I used to tell the kids about a couple of silversmiths. They were both very prominent, and one of them got an envelope and in the envelope was a single thread of silver. It was like one of your hairs. Just to prove that you can draw silver that small. The time went by and now the other guy got an envelope and it was the same thread of silver, but it was hollow.

MR. FITZGERALD: You just use traditional joinery then. You haven't really tried to come up with anything new. The old joinery is just fine.

MR. KRENOV: Well, everything that's well done is new. Everything that's well done is new that has nice proportions and so on. It's never been actually duplicated anywhere, and if you don't steal it from somebody, if it's your own doing, that's it. It is new. You don't have to stand on your head.

I mean, the Furniture Society is very happy with people that are standing on their head, and then they're writing about the experience. They say, "Oh, I" – you know, "I was so elated doing this thing. It was like a revelation to me. I felt that I was a part of the cosmos when I did that."

MR. FITZGERALD: Could you tell your joinery from somebody else's. What's unique about it?

MR. KRENOV: Well, it isn't unique at all, but the idea is that if you make a box or something of that nature, the weakest points are the corners. They'll break first on a box like this. It'll break here or here, but not in the middle. And so if you're playing a tune and you just keep hitting the same note all the time – dat, dat, dat, dat, dat, dat – somebody comes along and thinks, well, maybe there should be a rhythm in that. And what I try to get the students to do is to put the joints a little tiny bit closer in the beginning and then gradually bring them out and then get them closer at the ends so there's a rhythm there. You're trying to make music with the joinery.

A lot of people don't notice it, but I've had quite a few that do. You know, "Oh, that's interesting. You don't have just half an inch between each pin. This one's a quarter and that one's a little more and that one's big and – but that's neat. I haven't seen that before," you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: So your joints have a certain rhythm to them?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, but it's not mathematical. I would spoil everything if I measured it. The idea is to train yourself to where you can come pretty close just doing it, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: I've noticed that some –

MR. KRENOV: And the fact that this side is not exactly identical with that side is part of the charm, if there is any charm.

MR. FITZGERALD: You sometimes use a wide pin in the center.

MR. KRENOV: Yes. There's a distance there, and I can have a larger one and then, you know, smaller ones. It's just a whim. It's not planned. It depends upon the distance I'm going to travel. If I've got something that wide, then maybe it's kind of nice to see a big pin in the middle and then they get smaller and they get smaller and there's a big one in the middle.

MR. FITZGERALD: And the pins usually have a blunt pin rather than a pointy one.

MR. KRENOV: Well, what I've tried to get the guys to notice is the fact that if – well, this is illustrated, I think, in one of the books. That if the pin is like that, it's tired and sloppy, but if you can create pins that have a very subtle flair out – just barely noticeable, it can be done and it's lovely to look at because then they're crisp.

MR. FITZGERALD: But usually those are just sawn, so to get the curve –

MR. KRENOV: Well, you can work them together that way. You'd have to watch it happen, but I love to do it.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you use a chisel to get the curve?

MR. KRENOV: I use whatever I need. Sometimes a chisel, sometimes a knife. Sometimes both. It's rather easy if you know what you're doing.

MR. FITZGERALD: It sounds quite complex. Kind of difficult to get it to match.

MR. KRENOV: And I've had students do that and enjoy it immensely, you know, but it's not a must. If it's straight, I'll accept it, but if it's a little bit like that I won't [indicating a sagging].

MR. FITZGERALD: Bowed out.

MR. KRENOV: Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: You don't want it bowed out. Are there any other details like that in your work?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, there are just endless variations. I mean, it's always varying like I told you. The hand discovers these things. I told you about the table yesterday. You remember?

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: And you run your hand and then you stop here and somebody spends a lot of time wondering what the hell that was that bothered your hand that you had felt, you know.

It's endless. I mean, you can do like our friend down in Bolinas does with sort of a doughnut edge. I think it's just – you know, a doughnut, but if you have an edge, you can do a million things with it. You can come down a little bit and then go down, and this, you can see a little shadow there because your plane was there. You don't leave that very sharp. But you don't lose it if you do that, you know.

So in all of this work there is a point of subtlety and a point of feeling that is difficult to explain because it's just simply there. It's like asking a violinist, "Why is it that you play this Bach concerto?" Why is it that this is the particular passage you play, you know, whatever? If you're a musician. And he'll just say, "Well, it's because I do it. That's the way I feel about it. I don't know how Bach would have. The score says pianissimo and so I'm, you know, very gentle about it."

I don't think that explanations of these things can be generalized. I think that they work best when you actually have people who understand the media and that are probably working in it. Then you have a common language and you can explain and illustrate and do all these things, you know.

Have you met Yong Chen?

MR. FITZGERALD: Yong Chen? No.

MR. KRENOV: No? Oh, he's a Chinese gentleman. He's written one or two books and he teaches wherever he's invited. He's a wonderful person, but he has this marvelous ability to illustrate three dimensional joints and things like in Chinese furniture, Chinese chairs, and things. He's got a chair that he carries with him in a little wooden box, and he'll assemble it for the students and it's extremely strong. No glue or nothing; just put together with those Chinese joints, you know, and he makes the point, but he draws very well in the sense that this is how it looks in a cross section, you know. An interesting man: Yong Chen. He lives south of San Francisco airport in San Bruno. Very interesting man.

MR. FITZGERALD: So you didn't notice –

MR. KRENOV: Oh, no. No. I had an amah, a Chinese amah, and I was two years old – three years old, but I did run away from her one time, and they found me and we were on an island called PoT al,

which is a temple island, and they found me in one of the little temples on my knees with the other Chinese; you know, doing this thing in front of the Buddha and I was two years old.

But I'm not a Buddhist. I respect that belief and so on, but I'm not denominational at all. I don't belong to a church. I'm much too metaphysical you know, to adhere to a religion. I just believe in reincarnation and all kinds of things, and I was brought up on those legends, you know, and that's it.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do any of those beliefs get into your furniture?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, goodness, no. How do you – how does one do that? You know, that would be if I was a member of the Furniture Society. I'd tell you they do. I'm not. They don't.

MR. FITZGERALD: [Laughs.] Okay. I knew the answer to that question.

MR. KRENOV: You can include that in the –

MR. FITZGERALD: One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the Mendocino Furniture Guild.

MR. KRENOV: Yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: A fine woodworking guild. Did you start that?

MR. KRENOV: No, but friends of mine and people I know very well did. It goes back – oh, God, I don't know. It goes back more than 20 years. They keep trying, but, you know, the effort that some people make to take part in a show doesn't always justify itself. You know, you break your neck. You work real hard. You've got these things and you put them in the show and nothing is sold. People like them and walk on, you know. It's in a way disheartening.

But on the other hand, you know, I've never disliked it in any way. It's sincere and they're trying, but it's just that – you know, they'll put on a show at the Ukiah Museum [Grace Hudson Museum, Ukiah, California] and who buys something in a museum? So they have to live a little bit. Catch as catch can, you know. You try – you get a commission sometimes. You make something. Show it someplace. But it's nice. You know, it's a society. It's not prominent, but – and they've got one down in Bolinas and Sonoma woodworkers have something similar [Sonoma County Woodworker Association] and I know the people that are there, and the Baulines Craft Guild and, oh, I don't know who else, but there are a lot of them.

MR. FITZGERALD: Were you – for three years –

MR. KRENOV: Safety in numbers, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: When you came out here, did you start up the guild at that time?

MR. KRENOV: The guild? No, no, no. I'm not a part of how it came about or anything. It was there before I came.

MR. FITZGERALD: You know, on some of your resumes it says that you were associated with the Mendocino Woodworkers Association from 1978 to '80.

MR. KRENOV: It's news to me. I know everybody there, but that's not, you know, being associated in the sense of a post or a participation in something or, you know, taking part in their shows and so on. No, no, no.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you exhibit with them?

MR. KRENOV: I don't think I've shown much anywhere, really. For a very short time I contributed something to the school's show at the end of the year.

MR. FITZGERALD: At the College of the Redwoods.

MR. KRENOV: But otherwise no.

MR. FITZGERALD: How did people find you? Did they write you letters and come by. Is that how you were able to sell?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, it was hand-to-mouth, you know. I've had an anything but lucrative existence. I don't – I can't say, "Oh, well, the reason I became famous is," or the – you know, "the reason everybody pays high prices for my work." They don't. I almost give away what I do, and people remark about that. They say, "What the hell's the matter with you? This is, you know, 19 – or 2000 whatever, and you're valuing your work like you did 30 years ago – 40 years ago."

I think it's a reaction to the famous craftsman approach, like W. C. [Wendell Castle] and all the other ones, you know. My work – it's worth a lot more than somebody else's. I'm the craftsman, so my work has to increase in value. It's a collector's item and you better pay for it as a collector's item. I didn't like that. I detest it.

I just make things and try to pay the bills and it depends on who wants it and how badly they want it and, you know, if I know it's just pocket money for them, maybe I'll ask for \$500 more and if I realize that they are just scraping in order to get this thing, I'll come way down and almost give it away. And I might be tempted to give some things away, but it's in a sense humiliating if you can't get anything for your work. It's a form of humiliation. So there's a level there where I would say, well, that's what, you know, I'd like to get for it. If I can't, then I'd better give it away. But I need that to pay the rent and buy some wood and so on. I need that much. And it's an honest number, but, you know, if you think that's outrageous – well, nobody does, but all right. If you think that's too much, you know, then I feel like I'd rather give it to you than take less.

MR. FITZGERALD: So you've never really worked through galleries. It's just been mostly word of mouth?

MR. KRENOV: Yes, it's just from case to case. And sometimes I feel that a piece is pretty good. You know, the wood is good and the workmanship is good and I have an honest satisfaction out of getting X. Sometimes even X plus Y.

Bebe [Pritam and Eames] – I don't remember how much they add. They almost double the price. I used to send a lot of my work to them at Pritam and Eames, but like I said yesterday, they got a little bit artsy and I just didn't – you know they'd double it, so if I wanted \$5,000 for it, it would cost you \$10,000 and that's not my – in New Zealand they would say, "It's not my bag." You know why?

MR. FITZGERALD: No.

MR. KRENOV: You don't?

MR. FITZGERALD: No.

MR. KRENOV: Because in rural New Zealand, there are no mailboxes. There is a post and an arm

and on that arm is a leather bag and the postman has a corresponding leather bag, so he comes with the mail and he hangs the mail there and takes the empty bag with him and so my address is Karamea, private bag. And so I guess they evolved, you know, "That's not my bag," meaning that's not my thing.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you know Tage Frid?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I tried to play tennis with him up in Aspen, but he wasn't sober, so it didn't turn out very well. No, I didn't know him. I didn't know him.

I'm not looking for a fight ever. I'll go a long ways to avoid one. Maybe I was born a coward. I don't know. But, you know, they'll say, "Well what do you think of so and so?" And – [audio break, tape change] – it's not going to change the weather whatever I think, you know. If I think a young man is overambitious and the fellow that you mentioned yesterday – no names – is a fine technician, but it's like the interview with the pianist, you know. Oh, great technician. Sometimes I asked him, "When are you going to make music?" So the technique is there and the forms and all that stuff, but it's not – it doesn't sing. It doesn't sing.

MR. FITZGERALD: Is there a big difference between West Coast craftsmen and East Coast craftsmen, or do you think that's just a myth?

MR. KRENOV: I don't know. There might have been at one time when Art Carpenter was artsy, but now it's mostly all of it's derived from the computer, so that makes it coastless. Costly, but coastless.

MR. FITZGERALD: [Laughs.] We didn't really talk very much about your books yesterday. Could you tell me how they came about?

MR. KRENOV: Well, I did. I mentioned to you that I have, you know, been a pre-Kerouac hippie and I was telling people they should be happy doing whatever it is they're doing, and somebody followed me to Stockholm, and I got time to write *Notebook* and I got a lot of letters about the fact that it was going to be a classic, and I wrote the other books more out of obligation than anything else. People kept writing to me, "You've said why, and I like to hear what you said. Now, will you tell us a little bit about how?" So I wrote some very elementary books about the alphabet of woodworking, you know. The spoken word rather than the literary expression. That's all there is to it.

MR. FITZGERALD: They're beautifully written. Did the publisher edit them substantially?

MR. KRENOV: No, everything was done by me. We just had to do the artwork when I came to New York. They used to have me come over and I'd stay there two, three, four weeks and we'd do the artwork – illustrations, you know. We'd sort them out and so on. But I wrote everything. It was done; they just had to correct some of my horrible spelling. I never learned to spell. I can look up a word in the dictionary at 10:00 this morning and by now, 4:00 in the afternoon, I can't spell it. Was it two R's or was it one R? You know, was it two T's and an E, or T-E-T?

MR. FITZGERALD: Did you –

MR. KRENOV: But they joked about it, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: Have you written other books besides these furniture books?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, I wrote a book a very, very long time ago about – Britta and I bicycled in Italy

shortly after the war and I wrote a book. I wrote it in English, but it was published in Swedish, *Italian Journey*. It was just a little travel chatter. Quite political, because they were trying to get the Christian Democrats out of the government and all the cafes were just full of people taking politics and how they were going to get these Christian Democrats out of there. They didn't succeed, but yes.

MR. FITZGERALD: Did that experience influence your book –

MR. KRENOV: Oh, no, no. No connection whatsoever. No.

MR. FITZGERALD: Have you ever had much dealing with the American Craft Council?

MR. KRENOV: I know Paul Smith had silk shirts, and I know he did away with a hell of a lot of money that nobody knows where it went. He milked them dry. I don't know. I'm not saying that was criminal, but I met a Swedish gentleman of very high stature who was delegated by the Craft Council to investigate what happened to those millions. He couldn't find the answer. He said, you know, he tried, but it was untraceable. He just squandered. Silk shirts. And then when he wanted to put on a show, he actually had the gall to call me up and ask if he could borrow a piece, and I said, "Mr. Smith, you have pretended that I don't exist for 20 years; just keep on doing that." And I hung up on him.

MR. FITZGERALD: You were in the "Craft Today" ["Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical," American Craft Museum, New York, 1986] –

MR. KRENOV: Oh, they borrow things. They go to some dear old lady that's got one of my things and they borrow it.

MR. FITZGERALD: But not from you?

MR. KRENOV: Yes. The Philadelphia Museum – they went to Warren and Bebe several times, but they missed what they wanted, and then one day there was something there that was actually in the front of the Furniture Society's first book. There was a cabinet and the guy went right across the room and he hugged it and he said, "This is what I'm going to take to the museum." That was sweet. I liked that.

But, you know, I don't gripe about it, but if somebody asks me I just tell them. Some of these people that manage other people's lives know very little. They know very little. If you can create a song and dance image and you know – or very sloppy and you come on like, "Hey, man, I've got a thing you've got to have."

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you think that the *Craft Horizon*, it's now *American Craft*, do you subscribe to that? Do you think it's worthwhile?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, it's so artsy. I don't know.

MR. FITZGERALD: Is there any outlet that you see for the real craft –

MR. KRENOV: Well, unless a few people get together and counteract or at least start emphasizing the quiet, durable values, it'll get worse and not better. You know.

MR. FITZGERALD: You don't think there's any organization or any –

MR. KRENOV: This pot is just so goddamn ugly, it's *got* to be art.

MR. FITZGERALD: You mentioned that you've done quite a bit of traveling through England and Japan and you mentioned New Zealand. Were you teaching over there in New Zealand?

MR. KRENOV: Let's see. What were some of the reasons I went to England? I taught very briefly at Makepeace's and visited friends over there, and then they called me up and, like I mentioned yesterday, said that they'd give me a medal if I paid my way over and back. So – and I knew David Pye and I enjoyed meeting him at the Royal College, but you know, I didn't do extensive things in England.

MR. FITZGERALD: How about New Zealand?

MR. KRENOV: Well, in New Zealand I traveled. They sent me all over both islands doing workshops and I had – how many? – two at least, students from New Zealand here that came to study.

MR. FITZGERALD: And you said you traveled to Japan also.

MR. KRENOV: Yes, I got an invitation to a brand new little tiny university up in the mountains and spent a few months there. The purpose of it was there was a Japanese philosopher who founded it and his idea was that through an activity like craft, you would stimulate an international understanding of aesthetics and so on.

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you admire the Japanese approach to craft?

MR. KRENOV: Not necessarily. They are very confused. They can reproduce anything – Shaker, Queen Anne, anything. You tell them to do it, they'll do it and sell it, you know, but they're very confused in the contemporary sense. They can copy anything in the world, but to create out of a Japanese mentality and Japanese history, which, you know, is mostly those little boxes – tansu.

MR. FITZGERALD: Tansu.

MR. KRENOV: They lived on the floor. Matting was important furniture. Hey, come on. Maybe sometimes a low table that you could squat beside. So I don't know where they're headed. Brian Newell certainly doesn't make Japanese things in Japan.

MR. FITZGERALD: I think I asked you this yesterday, but I wanted to go into it a little more. One of these books I was reading said that you went through a curve phase.

MR. KRENOV: That what?

MR. FITZGERALD: That you went through a curve phase where your furniture had a lot of curves in it.

MR. KRENOV: That I used a lot of curves?

MR. FITZGERALD: Do you still do that? The book says that you went through a curve phase – that you used a lot of curves.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, no, no, no. I don't go through phases at all. I just don't have a very strong belief in the straight line, that's all. And I'm a boatbuilder and sailor and, you know, there's not a straight line in a fine yacht. I don't have phases or favorite curves or shapes or anything. I just evolve them, you know, on the spot – that looks pretty good and maybe I'll bring it in a little bit up there like that and layer it out and make it a little more steady on the floor and I'll choose a wood that goes well with

the cabinet itself and should the stand be lighter or should it be darker?

You know, you go through processes like that.

MR. FITZGERALD: And when you're teaching students, it seems to me to have that approach you'd have to have an awful lot of experience.

MR. KRENOV: Well, you have to care and you have to be aware. You have to see possibilities. Someone wrote – who was it? “You have to see possibilities where there are none.” And then I, you know, very often remind them of the fact that if you are in a kitchen or somewhere and you have to reach way up to open something, your hand is like that [gestures], but if you're in front of a dresser and you want to open the lower drawer, your hand is now like that [gestures].

MR. FITZGERALD: Yes.

MR. KRENOV: And very often your hand is like that this way and like that that way, so shapes of little details evolve from the feeling as much, if not more, than from the appearance. But if you get the feeling right, the appearance usually comes along.

MR. FITZGERALD: So, most of your work was sold just really directly by you. You didn't really deal with dealers except for a short period of time.

MR. KRENOV: Oh, somebody would come along that wanted it, you know. Or tell their friend, “The old man's finished a box over there. You might want to go and take a look at it.”

I'm very well familiar with neglect – with the absence of tangible reward, and it doesn't bother me anymore, you know. I saw a lot of people that were highly rewarded, and the more rewarded they were, the less sensitive they became.

MR. FITZGERALD: How would you like to be remembered?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, my God. I've never thought of that.

MR. FITZGERALD: Are you –

MR. KRENOV: Like a hopeless old enthusiast probably.

MR. FITZGERALD: What are you most proud of?

MR. KRENOV: I don't know. I don't really have time to dwell on things like that. I think that I'm fairly proud of the fact that I have not changed because of material conditions – that I have not adapted myself to the marketplace and said, “I've got to make things that I can sell,” instead of “I've got to make things that I can like and other people hopefully will like.” In other words, I can still look in the mirror and the guy I see there – he's not good looking, but he's still the same guy I used to know.

MR. FITZGERALD: You haven't changed your approach or your ways over time? Did you ever have anybody try to get you to change?

MR. KRENOV: Oh, no, no. I think maybe a few people who were in the business would try to copy something of mine, but it never worked out because it was just too damn much work. They gave up on it. You know, let's make a Krenov chess table, and it just didn't work, you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: Are you happy when you see your students carrying on these ideas?

MR. KRENOV: Well, the ones that really do, yes. Of course. And they remember me and they write to me and I – we talk on the telephone and yes, there's a great deal of appreciation around, you know, in different parts of the world and it means an awful lot to my wife to have somebody on the web, you know, write something nice to me – a letter. I've never met them. I don't know who they are, but there they are on the web, you know, and, "We want to thank you, Mr. Krenov, you have changed our lives. The things that you have said and written have meant a great deal to us and we just thought that we'd let you know." That's beautiful. And that's still happening, so you know.

MR. FITZGERALD: Is there anything that I've missed that we should talk about?

MR. KRENOV: I think that you came with a very specific and well rounded, you know, preparation and if you're not aware of some omission then we've done it. I mean, you've got a lot of material there – two hours of intense conversation.

I don't remember. I used to have an idea of how many pages one side of the old cassette would bring. It was quite a few.

MR. FITZGERALD: It's a lot.

MR. FITZGERALD: This is going to be a long interview.

MR. KRENOV: Well, I mean, you will delete whatever is repeated and out of the way, but I like to think that if you're interested in anybody, you're not going to distort or, you know, omit so much that it becomes incoherent – it becomes just for the sake of the record, but not for the sake of what you are and how you express yourself and so on, so try, you know, and let me know what happens.

You explain to the lady there – the head honcho – that I am not particularly enamored of the fact that they pretend for 25 years that somebody doesn't exist and then suddenly they become interested in who they are and what they are. I don't like that, but, you know, I've enjoyed you, but I do not think that in view of the fact that so many people know who I am and what I have done and they like it, I don't think it's – either the Smithsonian or the ACC have lifted a finger, you know. And it doesn't affect me materially, but I think that it's like somebody teaching literature, but they haven't read anything. You know, and they're trying to teach literature.

MR. FITZGERALD: It's been very, very inspiring.

MR. KRENOV: Well, thank you.

MR. FITZGERALD: It was good to be able to meet you.

MR. KRENOV: I appreciate your sincerity and your patience with me because it's hard to be patient with an old coot like me, you know. I go on and on and on and it can be too much of a good thing.

[END]

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