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Oral history interview with Silas Kopf, 2004 October 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Silas Kopf on October 1, 2004. The interview took place at the artist's studio in Easthampton, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Edward S. Cooke, Jr., 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.

Silas Kopf and Edward S. Cooke, Jr., 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

NED COOKE: This is Ned Cooke, and I am here interviewing Silas Kopf in Easthampton, Massachusetts, on the roof deck of his studio on October 1, 2004, for the Archives of American Art. This is disc number one of a set.

So, Silas, what I'd like to do, as I said, is to start off in terms of where you were before Easthampton, where you grew up, in essence, what your early recollection was about the built environment, about furniture. Where you where you born-in Pennsylvania?

SILAS KOPF: Yeah, I was born in northwest Pennsylvania-the town was Warren-in 1949, and had no particular family background in building trades or anything like that. However, I did go to school and get a degree in architecture.

MR. COOKE: What did your parents do there in Warren?

MR. KOPF: My father was an executive with a steel fabricating company. They made storage tanks for the oil industry, and it went back to the turn of the century when northwest Pennsylvania was an oil center. And the business had kind of faded away over the decades, but nevertheless, there was still a little fabricating plant there.

MR. COOKE: So did you have any experience as a kid going into the fabrication shop or [seeing] some things to be made?

MR. KOPF: Not at all. He was pretty much done with that by the time that I was of an age when that would have been interesting, I guess. I don't know if it ever would have been interesting. I mean, it was big, heavy machines there stamping out steel plate, and welders, and whatnot. But he never-he never showed any particular interest in having-I have two brothers-any of us follow along in that.

MR. COOKE: Right. Never tagging along into-[laughs]-into the shop to see what's going on. But you ended up, then, heading off to college in Princeton [Princeton University, Princeton, NJ].

MR. KOPF: Correct.

MR. COOKE: Did you have a sense of architecture even before going, or was that something you developed an interest while you there?

MR. KOPF: Well, I felt like I had some ability to draw, and so that-architecture then became a logical outlet relative to Princeton at that point. There was no studio art program, or it just, like, just beginning when I was there. And so everything was a lot more academic, so architecture was a more reasonable academic sort of choice for an Ivy League school like that.

MR. COOKE: How did you get an interest in-how did you understand you had a talent in drawing? Was it just self-taught, or-

MR. KOPF: Pretty much self-taught. I would draw things as a kid and carried it on to some degree, although as a teenager I didn't really get particularly involved in it because I was more academically inclined. I was definitely going to pursue something that-while parents were pushing me that way, too-you know, do something that is a little more practical than art.

MR. COOKE: Right. [Laughs.] "Think of what you want to do for a career," right?

MR. KOPF: Right, exactly. So architecture was a compromise for those sorts of things. I mean, my mother was happy with that; my father was not particularly happy with that. He thought that-"No, do something really more practical." Even architecture was a really dicey that way.

So I did-but did get my degree in architecture but didn't go on to graduate school, so I never got licensed. It was just simply an undergraduate degree.

MR. COOKE: A bit curious-have you ever gone back to look at what you drew-whether you were interested in perspective, floral; I mean, was there anything in particular that you can look back to in your drawing and, sort of, what you were captured by?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I was sort of interested in still-life pictures-not landscapes or anything like that. It was a much more-smaller scale of drawing, portrait-type stuff, and still lifes were-that seemed to have the level of, if you like, craftiness to it-that my intent was to draw as realistically as I could, and so that was-that's where I went.

MR. COOKE: Something about the personal or the intimate as opposed to the landscape. Did your family go to a lot of museums? Were you aware of that kind of exposure?

MR. KOPF: Almost never. My mother had a little bit of interest in that, but we were-we were in northwest Pennsylvania-there were-

MR. COOKE: There's nothing close by, so-

MR. KOPF: -pretty much of a cultural wasteland out there. And we never went to big cities and whatnot. And it was definitely-didn't come up on my father's radar screen at all. Just-

MR. COOKE: Interesting.

MR. KOPF: -interested-he was interested in business and football, maybe; I'm not sure-something along those lines. So the art thing just wasn't for him; but my mom thought of herself as cultured-and she was-or is.

MR. COOKE: And so when you're at Princeton and sort of thinking about ways of-you're on your own in some ways and can satisfy some of this. Did you see architecture right away, or was there some engineering at first, and then in architecture, or-

MR. KOPF: No, it was sort of-well, you have to make a choice at Princeton in your junior year as to what you're going to major in, but if you're going to do architecture, you have to lay the groundwork a little bit earlier. You have to take some of the preliminary courses that are slightly more design-engineering oriented.

So I started right off freshman year thinking, okay, this is something that I think maybe I'm interested in.

MR. COOKE: And did you have any role models about architects at that point?

MR. KOPF: You know, I thought that I was interested in-well, just bear in mind, I didn't pursue it as a career-so that says something, but-

MR. COOKE: Right, but I'm just curious whether *The Fountainhead* [Ayn Rand. Philadelphia: The Blakiston Company, 1943]-you know, people read *The Fountainhead* and sort of get excited about the heroic nature of an architect or somebody in sort of popular press or something like that.

MR. KOPF: Yeah. I think that if there-if there was a role model, I would have been interested in Frank Lloyd Wright that-the scale of that work or the domestic work-the prairie homes and what not-I thought, boy, that's pretty exciting stuff, as opposed to the larger skyscrapers and stuff like that. That never particularly intrigued me, but I thought domestic architecture is something neat and interesting about that, almost sculptural in some way, shape, or form in the-so if there-yeah, I guess if there was a role, that would have been the one that I would have been interested in. However, with that being said, that-the pursuit of that type of architecture was discouraged at Princeton at that time.

MR. COOKE: Really?

MR. KOPF: They were much more interested in, sort of, the social engineering aspect of architecture that-use your architecture skills to manipulate things for society as opposed to building an elitist house for one particular individual. And-

MR. COOKE: That's curious. Was Robert Judson Clark teaching there in the art-

MR. KOPF: He was.

MR. COOKE: Because he-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, but he-well, no-but he was in the art program-he was in the art department as opposed to the

architecture thing.

MR. COOKE: The history of art.

MR. KOPF: Actually, I did take a class with him that I thought was fabulous.

MR. COOKE: Because I was just wondering, with that interest in Wright, and the domestic and arts and crafts sort of ideology in architecture, that that would be a natural-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, but I'm not so sure-if you went to the powers that be in the architecture program itself-if they thought that he was particularly interesting. You know, he's an historian-okay, we'll tolerate those people. We needed somebody to talk about Greek architecture, and you had a couple mandatory classes that you had to take in the history of art or history of architecture, and his was one of those that was offered. But I'm not sure that that ever really was practical, in terms of the people who were running the program.

MR. COOKE: Is there something you can draw from Princeton that you feel like did provide a good foundation for going on?

MR. KOPF: If there was anything it was-well, actually, I think architecture as a problem solver is a lot like furniture. I mean, furniture is just a shrunk-down building that you have constraints and problems that need to be dealt with: how is somebody going to use that desk or whatnot in the same way? How is somebody going to use a house? How are they going to flow through it? How are you going to open the drawers?

So it's problem solving, and it's a matter then of starting with a sort of framework that you build up on, and so I think that the design process is pretty much the same no matter what the scale of the object is.

MR. COOKE: So maybe your studio experience proved to be helpful?

MR. KOPF: I think it was helpful. I'm not sure-I never felt like I was a particularly good student and they-I did get turned off to the program-by the time I was into it and committed to it, I was getting more and more disenchanted with it.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs] Dangerous.

MR. KOPF: [Laughs] But at that point it was tough-what are you going to do? I'm not going to switch to history at this point or whatever. You know, follow it through and just-it'll be okay.

But I really felt like the-as I said-the social engineering aspect of architecture was what the people on the faculty were interested in-and that wasn't-that just didn't interest me. I just really didn't care very much about that. And so-okay, just follow through and finish up here, and I think that's why I didn't go on and get a graduate degree.

MR. COOKE: Did you find something else at that time that was sort of satisfying-more satisfying than-

MR. KOPF: Actually, they did have a studio-an art studio-that was not course work, or not-you didn't get graded for it-an elective of some sort.

MR. COOKE: Extracurricular.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, extracurricular sort of thing, and there was actually an economics professor who had a little studio and he was doing wood sculpture.

MR. COOKE: Who was that?

MR. KOPF: His name was William Baumol.

MR. COOKE: What's his last name?

MR. KOPF: Baumol-B-A-U-M-O-L. And he's a very well respected economist. I think he's splitting his time between NYU [New York University] and Princeton now, but occasionally we'll pick up a *New York Times* or something like that and see his name in connection with economics and-so he had this little studio-it was a hobby for him, and somehow I found my way into that and expressed some interest, and he taught me how to sharpen tools, and-

MR. COOKE: Did he have other people there?

MR. KOPF: No, I was the only one.

MR. COOKE: You were the only one.

MR. KOPF: I was the only one.

MR. COOKE: And what-was he doing figurative work, or-

MR. KOPF: No, he was doing abstract sort of stuff-kind of-gosh-it's a little hard for me to remember at this point. I think it was sort of like Henry Moore, just, sort of, shapes that were done.

There was another teacher who was teaching sculpture there who I kind of liked, and he was doing figurative work. His name was Joe Brown. Joe was doing, like, big sports figures. He was an athlete himself, and he did a lot of-little statuettes for trophies and stuff like that, and ultimately he did some big sculptures for the Philadelphia Veterans Stadium of baseball players and football players. And he had a pretty neat studio that was kind of loosey-goosey. People would drift in and out, and doing figurative work, and that was pretty exciting at the time. I thought it-

MR. COOKE: So you spent time there with him?

MR. KOPF: I spent some time there as well, and I thought at a certain point that might be something that would interest me.

MR. COOKE: Was he working in wood? Or was he doing-

MR. KOPF: No, no, clay.

MR. COOKE: -clay and then cast.

MR. KOPF: Yeah. So I did-I did some of that. Never got to the point where I felt like any of it was very good, but I did feel like I had some aptitude for the three dimensional as opposed to the drawing thing and wondered if there was a way of translating that interest in the three dimensional into some sort of a career mode.

MR. COOKE: But that wasn't anything that really had hit you yet. I mean, it's the classic thing, I think, about being [in] college at that point. It wasn't as if you were-had a professional [track] that you were on. It was a-

MR. KOPF: Well, some people did. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Well, but a lot of people were sort of exploring then-we'll sort of-we'll deal with the real world after graduation.

MR. KOPF: Well, I was definitely of that mode. I was looking for some sort of alternative lifestyle as well. Something outside-now to go back to the architecture thing-the career choices in architecture appeared to be go to graduate school, then get a job with some big architectural firm-

MR. COOKE: Doing international style corporate architecture.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly, you know, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill or something like that, and you'd spend five years drawing heat ducts in a skyscraper somewhere, and the prospect of that just held no allure for me at all. And that was-and so I go back to the faculty-I think that's what they [were] holding up as a potential model for someone-is doing that type of stuff. And so I was looking for something else, and the sculpture thing just happened to drop into my lap, and it actually did look like there was a potential of alternative something or other.

MR. COOKE: But you hadn't taken a step the way other people were, sort of, designed to head to Vermont and build their own homes or something like-I mean, there wasn't going to be an architectural component of that, but it was going to be more the-your own creativity.

MR. KOPF: Well, I was also draft-eligible, and so staying in school was an attractive-

MR. COOKE: Yes-

MR. KOPF: -alternative for me at that point.

MR. COOKE: -safety net. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Although I often thought at some point I should have dropped out. It would have been healthy for me to go away for a year or two or something like that and then maybe come back with a new interest in architecture, and actually, it was a couple years after I got out of school that I started to look at what some people were doing with architecture that I thought-hey, that's pretty cool stuff-that they were doing lifestyle choices. You may remember those early shelter books that were out there-the *Whole Earth Catalog* [1968-1972]-

MR. COOKE: *Whole Earth Catalog*-

MR. KOPF: -and that stuff.

MR. COOKE: And the "wood butchers" out in California.

MR. KOPF: Exactly, that sort of stuff, and that's pretty cool. That's architecture on a level that would interest me, and also using different technologies, and sort of using architecture as a-as a way of changing society in a way that the Princeton faculty was not necessarily interested in-or didn't appear to be at the time. But [that] all came-and interest in that sort of stuff came later, and by then I had sort of glommed onto furniture as my alternative choice.

MR. COOKE: But at this point, furniture is not even on the radar screen.

MR. KOPF: Not on the radar screen at all. So I got out of school and sort of drifted for a year or so, and actually then they-

MR. COOKE: No pressure from your father?

MR. KOPF: We were somewhat estranged at that point. However, my mother was instrumental in me getting into furniture, because she knew I was interested in wood carving, wood sculpture, and she saw a piece of furniture that she thought had a sculptural bent to it, and that I should go take a look at. And it was in a town, oh, 20 miles away from my hometown or so.

So I did go take a look at it, and it actually turns out it was built by Richard Newman-and I know you know Richard quite well. And at the time, Richard was making furniture that had sort of an art nouveau feel to it, and it fit in with that art nouveau that I was familiar with through Robert Clark's class. So it comes sort of full circle.

MR. COOKE: The pieces start to fall in.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, the [Emile] Galle and [Louis] Majorelle were things that I had taken an interest in the academic way.

MR. COOKE: So was that, like-yeah, was that, like, a year after [you] graduated?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, about year after, yeah. Nine months, a year, or something like that.

MR. COOKE: And so had you gone home in the meantime, or-

MR. KOPF: I went home, and then I went back and lived with friends in New Jersey for-I went home for the summer, then went back to New Jersey and just sort of hung out.

MR. COOKE: Postgraduate work. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Postgraduate work, yeah, exactly. And then it became apparent-okay, you got to-hanging out is not going to work forever here. You got to do something. And then that's when my mother made that suggestion to me.

MR. COOKE: So had she seen-was there a show that Richard was in or-

MR. KOPF: He had one piece in this little craft store-or gift shop almost-in a town on Chautauqua Lake, and my hometown is about 20 miles from Chautauqua. He's in a Rochester, and that's 60, 70 miles in the other direction. So he knew the guy who ran the gift shop, and the guy said, why don't you try something here for the summer and see how it goes? So my mother had seen that and said, "Go take a look at this."

So I got Richard's name and called him up and said, "I'm three hours away; can I come and"-

MR. COOKE: Come see you.

MR. KOPF: -"come and see you and see how you got into this thing," and so on and so forth, because it looked like making a functional object like he was making-this was a cabinet that hung on a wall-had all the elements of sculpture, but perhaps a market that fine art didn't have.

MR. COOKE: It wasn't totally self-indulgent in some respects. There was something-

MR. KOPF: Well, I think it is self-indulgent in its own-

MR. COOKE: Well, yeah.

MR. KOPF: -but that was the perception at the time.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. KOPF: I think you nailed it in that way: that this looks like there's a reality to this that sculpture doesn't have. So I gave him a call, and he said, "Come on up and I'll show you around and talk to you," and so on.

So I did make that trip up. I still remember it vividly.

MR. COOKE: So this was, like, 1973?

MR. KOPF: Seventy-three-1973. And Richard had been on his own for a couple of years at that point, and-

MR. COOKE: Because he had worked for Wendell [Castle] previously-

MR. KOPF: Exactly.

MR. COOKE: -and then had gone out on his own sort of-initially sort of working in sort of a "Wendellesque" mode.

MR. KOPF: Right. That was the art nouveau sort of feel. That's the sort of work that Wendell was doing at that point. But Richard was also working with veneers and stuff that Wendell wasn't doing. However, I had never heard of Wendell-didn't mean anything to me.

MR. COOKE: So you had no recognition of the field at large.

MR. KOPF: Knew nothing about anything. Richard was the only person that I knew, and that was through that phone call or through that one cabinet.

MR. COOKE: What was your impression going into his shop?

MR. KOPF: Well, I felt like he was kindred spirit. I mean, he was clearly alternative-I'm not going to use the word hippie-but he was kind of along-

MR. COOKE: Well, yeah.

MR. KOPF: -those lines, yeah. And it was kind of a funky shop, and he was dressed in the way that I was dressing-had long hair like I had at that point and so on.

So we spent a couple hours there, went out to lunch, as I remember it. And then he said, "Well, let me take you out and introduce to the guy that I used to work for." So that was Wendell, and Wendell was out in the suburbs there. We drove on out. And Wendell's studio was fabulous-really an interesting lifestyle that he had chosen for himself, or then had. We walked into the shop, and Wendell wasn't there that day, but he was working on a spiral staircase that was just about done. It was all sanded, polished up, ready to be oiled.

MR. COOKE: So it's one of his stacked, laminated stairways.

MR. KOPF: Exactly. And I-oh man, this is it. This is what I was-

MR. COOKE: It gets better. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: -what I was hoping to do. And here's sculpture, big sculpture, and it's-

MR. COOKE: It's architectural space, it's personal-

MR. KOPF: You got it. It's got everything that I was interested in-the shaping of the wood-and the wood carving that I was attempting to do at that point was sort of organic-along those lines-the Henry Moore-ish sort of look and feel.

So I was smitten. And I got Wendell's phone number from the shop assistant at that point and called him up.

MR. COOKE: It wasn't a huge shop at that point. He probably had about four people there?

MR. KOPF: No, he had two people there.

MR. COOKE: Just two.

MR. KOPF: Just two, and in fact at that point it might have only been one. His shop situation was that he-well, actually, I'll tell you when I get my space there what his working relationship was. So he-

MR. COOKE: But he was still primarily, in '73, just doing-he was doing a fair amount of stuff-laminated stuff.

MR. KOPF: They were all stack-laminated things.

MR. COOKE: And almost becoming a line of good, rather than one of a kind, because it seemed like he was starting to do a lot of the two cedars, and just-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, he was developing his look-this is my thing. They were monolithic entities-started with a chain saw, finished with a body grinder. And a very little constructive part to it-the occasional drawer, or maybe a door, but not much-they were pretty much sculptures with a flat top for a table or whatever.

And so I called him up and said, "I'd love to have a job." Richard-I would have been happy to work with Richard, but Richard didn't have anything.

MR. COOKE: Richard, at that point, was starting to do more veneer work, and was this when he was doing some of his banjos and his musical instruments?

MR. KOPF: Right after that he started doing some. But he might have done some banjos up to that point, but I know he made a really fine banjo, like, a year or two later.

MR. COOKE: Because he was really right on that verge of heading out into his own realm of what we tend to think of his current work. I mean this is the base of it-

MR. KOPF: Exactly, exactly.

MR. COOKE: It's occurring right at that point.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, leaving the "Wendell-Art Nouveau" look behind and getting more-yeah, developing his own thing.

MR. COOKE: But he didn't want to take on somebody.

MR. KOPF: He just didn't have the work. He did have one guy who was working with him at that point, and that was it. He might have just been kind, too, because I had no skills to offer, and that was the response that I got from Wendell, too.

So I called Wendell and said I'd like to learn how to do what he's doing and would he consider taking me on as an employee, and he said, "Well, what skills do you have?" And I said, "I don't have any." [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: "I have an interest."

MR. KOPF: Or I can-I have an interest and I can sharpen a gouge and hack away at stuff, but he said, "Well, you'd be a whole lot more valuable if you did have some skill to offer."

Actually, I should back up on one step. I had forgotten this aspect of it-that when I was at Princeton, somebody had told me that there was a furniture maker in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and I should go over and visit-Princeton and New Hope are not too terribly far away, maybe 45 minutes or something like that. So I borrowed [a] car and went over there one day-this is in my senior-and it was George Nakashima. And that was a jaw-dropping experience too, to walk into that studio and see that-

MR. COOKE: So was he welcoming?

MR. KOPF: Not at all. [Laughs.] Not at all. And I-he had open house-whatever-on certain days, and I guess I had found that out. Wednesday afternoon was the day to meet with clients, or something like that. So I'm there, and it was actually the day that I went in, he was meeting with clients, and I'm sort of hanging out in the background, waiting for him to be done-and it was 45 minutes to an hour-and I'm looking at all these big slabs of wood, and so on.

Finally, I got my chance, and I went over and introduced myself, and I said, "Gosh, this is fabulous what you're doing here. I wonder if you'd ever consider taking on an employee." Or maybe I had told him that I was a student at Princeton, and so on, and so forth. And he just lit into me. He said, "You people come over here, and you think that you have your college degree and you can do this." And he said, "In Europe back in the 1700s, you had to work under a workbench, and sweep the shavings off the floor for three years before you could ever get a job," and so on, and so forth, and it's like, whoa. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: And here is somebody who came out of an architecture school.

MR. KOPF: Well, I only found that out later. [Laughs.] Ultimately, he warmed up a little bit, and said, "We don't have a situation here in America like they have in Europe in terms of training people, and so you're kind of stuck." But he did mention RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology, NY] as a possible place to go and get some training. So that was the first I'd ever heard of RIT.

MR. COOKE: Because it seemed like Nakashima did ultimately sort of refer people to go earlier-told Charles Webb to go up to the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen and go see the people up there-and he did have some sort of connections, ultimately.

MR. KOPF: Well, that may be. Or maybe I was just patently offensive at the time, showing up probably in ripped blue jeans and flannel shirt, and like, hey-

MR. COOKE: "Tell me, what's going on?"

MR. KOPF: Yeah, "Hey, I'm going to Princeton. Certainly you'd want me, wouldn't you?" So I appreciate that, that he-

MR. COOKE: So RIT was on the radar.

MR. KOPF: It was loosely on the radar, and then I found out that Richard was an RIT grad, so that sort of reinforced that as a possibility.

So Wendell then suggested to me, "If you had some skills, you'd be better off," and he mentioned RIT as a possibility, I think.

MR. COOKE: Even though he wasn't teaching there-

MR. KOPF: He wasn't teaching there.

MR. COOKE: -officially at that time.

MR. KOPF: Well, I don't think he was teaching there at all, maybe, at that point. He was teaching at Brockport [SUNY Brockport, Brockport, NY].

MR. COOKE: Brockport.

MR. KOPF: I went on over to RIT. I mean, it was only a couple miles away and it was even in the same trip, I believe, and got a brochure. And they did have a summer class, but it was filled up, but they did say that they had an evening class that was a possibility. And so I thought, okay, I'll give this a try.

So I actually moved to Rochester, found myself a little apartment, and signed up for this evening class-not having any idea how much work-not work-how much education you need to construct something. It's one thing to take a log and start sculpting it. That's loosey-goosey-you can do anything. But to actually-

MR. COOKE: The planning-

MR. KOPF: -be able to clean a plane, and saw it square, and cut some dovetails, or whatever, is something significant. But I did sign up for the class, and it was two nights a week-went on for-it was supposed to be 10 weeks through the summer, which is a grand total of 40 hours-you know, what-

MR. COOKE: Hardly-

MR. KOPF: -what can you do in 40 hours?

MR. COOKE: Who was teaching it?

MR. KOPF: It was one of the students who was there. I can't remember the guy's name now. And actually, they didn't even get enough people to sign up after five weeks to do the second half of it. So I had all of 20 hours experience making something. But I made myself a little box, and it got me to Rochester, and the plus about Rochester was that, since the school was there, there were a lot of people who had gone through the program who stuck around. There are a lot of craftspeople in Rochester because of RIT.

And I started asking around, and ultimately got a job with a fellow named Don Dean, who did architectural stuff-furniture, built-in-not quite cabinetwork, but it's sort of that.

MR. COOKE: But not quite millwork either.

MR. KOPF: Not millwork either, exactly.

MR. COOKE: Something in between

MR. KOPF: Somewhere in between. But it was a way of getting some skills, because my ultimate goal was to go back to Wendell and say, "I've learned something"-

MR. COOKE: "I'm employable now." [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly-more employable. So I worked for Don Dean for a year, and every three months or so, I'd call Wendell and say, "Do you have anything yet?" So I think my persistence paid off in that sense, because I showed that I did follow his suggestion of getting some skills-

MR. COOKE: So this is '74?

MR. KOPF: This is '73, '74. Yeah, it's through the course of '73 I'm working for Don Dean. And I did learn stuff with Don-how to use a table saw, and apply finish, and so on and so forth. I mean, it wasn't a high-skill craft situation. There was one guy who was pretty skilled there, and the rest of us were screw-gun, assembly sort of guys.

MR. COOKE: But there's the practical side of it all that's actually really helpful.

MR. KOPF: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think, in some ways, that sort of an experience is a better way of learning than school stuff.

So after a year of working there with Don Dean, Wendell called me and said, "I do have something now." So-

MR. COOKE: That was right at the time that he was starting to build up the shop.

MR. KOPF: No, it was still two people.

MR. COOKE: It was still just two?

MR. KOPF: It was still two people. And what he had was-so when I talked to him, he said, "You're going to be useless for one year, and then maybe in the second year I'll get my investment back in training you."

MR. COOKE: But he wanted a commitment for a while.

MR. KOPF: A commitment for two years. And so every year he would replace one person. That was the way it had been going-the people leap frog one another with the idea in mind that the person who had already been there a year would teach the next person-because he was gone a lot-he was teaching-so he needed somebody who knew the ropes.

So actually, after one year, well, the guy who was working there had been an RIT grad also-his name was Hunter Kariher.

MR. COOKE: Oh, yeah, I didn't know that.

MR. KOPF: Got along real well with Hunter. It was a nice experience. And Hunter was a good craftsman and knew how to do Wendell's stuff pretty well. Everything, as I said, was stack-laminated at that point-well, there was a couple little things that were just barely constructed.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. COOKE: So Stephen Proctor is not there at this point?

MR. KOPF: No, Stephen came after I had been there for a little bit more than a year.

MR. COOKE: So Hunter-

MR. KOPF: So that's right, when Wendell was starting-making a decision to build up the shop.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. KOPF: So I was there for a year and was alone for a couple months. Then he hired a young guy, just fresh out of college, who had gone to Alfred [Alfred University, Alfred, NY], and the guy who was teaching the woodshop [at] Alfred had been an employee of Wendell's years earlier.

So that fellow and I worked together for a while, and then he hired Stephen Proctor. And that changed Wendell's shop significantly.

MR. COOKE: You can see the shift in the type of product that comes out of there all of a sudden.

MR. KOPF: Well, Stephen offered Wendell skills that Wendell didn't have. Stephen was classically trained in England and so had all of those aspects-the joinery veneer work, so on and so forth, that it just increased the vocabulary that Wendell had.

So Wendell started to make some significantly different objects right then. So that was a pretty neat time to be there working for Wendell.

MR. COOKE: So that's '70-

MR. KOPF: Seventy-four to '76 was when I was there.

MR. COOKE: And were you just doing a lot of the chain saw and ball grinding stuff initially, or were you-

MR. KOPF: Yes, yes.

MR. COOKE: -just doing-getting the parts sun out and surfaced so they can be glued up.

MR. KOPF: Initially-that was it-initially the job for the guy who came in was to surface the material and ultimately polish the thing up. So go over it with a-go over the finished pieces, or the pieces that Wendell had sculpted down, with body grinded to get them prepared for finished.

MR. COOKE: And you'd surface everything up and then, so he would-would you do glue-up, and then he'd come in and sort of start shaping.

MR. KOPF: No, he did all that.

MR. COOKE: So he did the glue-up and the shaping?

MR. KOPF: He'd do the glue-up-it was pretty interesting watching the process of how he worked, that it would go layer by layer, and he'd sort of stand back and look at level four or wherever he was and say, "Okay, how big does the next piece have to be to sculpt the part out of it that I want?" So then he'd take that stack of material that had been milled up for him, lay it on the piece, the piece that he was working on, and just draw a line, and say, "This is where I'm going to band saw." I'd go over and band saw the thing out, and then that was sort of what he was stuck to. But he wanted to make the band saw cut as close as possible to the finished-

MR. COOKE: Profile.

MR. KOPF: -profile, exactly.

MR. COOKE: So what would Hunter do? I'm just curious about how this shop works. If the second-year person is there, do they get entrusted with something different?

MR. KOPF: Slightly different. Wendell would take-I'm trying-I'm going back almost 30 years-a little hard. But my memory was that Wendell would glue it up sort of layer by layer, and because it was layer by layer, he'd have a couple projects going on at a time, because he'd glue it on and they had to sit for a couple hours, so he just couldn't work on that piece there.

After it was glued up, he'd go at it with a chain saw and then a ball mill-like a one-inch, one-and-a-half inch ball mill, and essentially sculpt the shape that he would want. Then it was the more experienced apprentice's job to go over that and take the rough edges off of the sculpture with a Surform file and maybe a body grinder, and then Wendell would go back and correct some of the curves at that point, and then it would be turned over to the less experienced person to do the final scraping and sanding.

MR. COOKE: Sanding basically.

MR. KOPF: And oiling. And that's pretty much the way it was. So after I had been there for a year and the new guy came on, then I got to step to what Hunter had been doing, which was some of the actual sculptural shaping, but still was basically under Wendell's control, and off the ball mill, you pretty much knew what he was interested in-particularly after you had done a couple of pieces. You could tell how the curves flowed from one part to the other.

And then when Stephen came, Stephen offered him this new vocabulary of actually joining together traditional pieces of furniture. There had been very little of that in the first year that I had been there. I remember one-he had done card tables with veneer tops and four legs.

MR. COOKE: And those legs that were sort of-

MR. KOPF: They were dovetailed.

MR. COOKE: -key dovetail up into the frame.

MR. KOPF: Exactly, exactly. But they were sort of sculpted in an art nouveau kind of way, so the traditional furniture part of it was pretty limited. And there were chairs that went with that set that had vent laminated parts, a little bit of joinery, but it was pretty modest, too, and I remember some of the parts were even-they were even screwed and doweled, or something along those lines. So it was modest in the traditional craft.

MR. COOKE: So do you remember the first piece that Stephen really had a hand in?

MR. KOPF: Oh, man. I remember a couple. One of them springs to mind that there was a table-or it was a desk, I'm sorry-it was desk that had a drawer in it, maybe two drawers, and had three legs-it was a triangular-shaped table, and had some pretty fancy veneer on the top, and some significant sculptural carving-like, I think it was realistically carved-the leg ended with-a hand and the thumb were like a ball and claw would be. So the thumb was essentially holding up the top. But I could be totally wrong about that. But I do remember a piece that was done like that.

And there were a lot of things with drawers that then became a possibility. Like the drawer thing that he had done prior that were, maybe, one drawer in a piece-

MR. COOKE: Just swing drawers and stuff like that.

MR. KOPF: Right, right. Exactly. So now there were was more of a carcass sort of thing, and the things were more constructed than clearly sculpted. But the work change-Wendell's work changed a lot more right after I left. He had one more big stairway that was the last big project that I worked on, for the Gannett newspaper chain, which was in Rochester.

MR. COOKE: That sort of hanging one.

MR. KOPF: Exactly, exactly. It was in their office building in a skyscraper in Rochester, and I think-he got the job-and I think that's why he was actually interested in hiring more people. He hired a fourth person at that point as well, and that was-it was all in walnut-and there was whole lot of stuff to do. But it was in his previous style; it was along the lines of that first staircase that I had seen, only much, much bigger.

There was a complicated banister to make for it that all had to be laminated in that dimensional thing, and then there was a reception desk and more stuff, too. So his business was clearly growing at that point.

MR. COOKE: So did you get any experience with Stephen, just some of the fine furniture approach at that point?

MR. KOPF: A little bit. You know, I didn't get to do any of it myself, but Stephen was making some things-I wish I could recall what they were-but I'm watching him cut dovetails and stuff like that, which Wendell was capable of that, but Stephen just added a slightly different way of going about it, and I think that Wendell was essentially autodidactic in his craftsmanship. I actually remember Wendell saying that he watched-it was either-when he was teaching at RIT, he watched either Fred [Meyer] or [James] Krenov sort of in the background-oh, I get it; that's how you cut a dovetail-and then went off and practiced on his own.

So he was capable of that stuff, but I think once Stephen was there, clearly under his guidance, I think Stephen worked with him in terms of the design of the case-should that be a-that's my memory of it. But we were all cut up in that big stairway and whatnot, but I think Stephen was starting to work on some other things at that point, and maybe he even threw some of that stuff into, like, the reception desk, for all I know.

MR. COOKE: Right, for Gannett.

MR. KOPF: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: So Wendell-sort of-you had this understanding-was going to be a limited amount of time that you're going to be there and-

MR. KOPF: For two years, yeah. And when the two years came-well, actually the other nice thing about Wendell was that he let us use the shop in our spare time. So we were welcome to come in on weekends or stay after hours and do stuff. And so at the same time, I'm sort of thinking, well, what's my angle going to be on this whole thing?

MR. COOKE: What's my next move, right?

MR. KOPF: Exactly, because I didn't want to be there with Wendell forever. And as I looked around-so then I was becoming a little more aware of what was going on in the field-who the other players were and what they were bringing-

MR. COOKE: Rochester being a good place for that.

MR. KOPF: -to it. Yeah, exactly.

MR. COOKE: Because people would come through and give talks or-

MR. KOPF: Well, for instance, Bill Keyser was there teaching at RIT, and I was aware of what he was doing. He was doing things with steam bending, and that was sort of a signature for him. I think Jere Osgood came through at some point and was talking about bent laminations. Nakashima was another potential source of influence in terms of "a look." And what it appeared to me at the time was all of these people have a look about what they're doing that is their signature, and distinguishes them, and makes them marketable in some way, shape, or form. And clearly Wendell had that stack-laminated thing; that was-that was his look, his signature, his baby.

And actually, I'll return to Richard at this point. I remember in that first meeting with Richard Newman, he mentioned that he felt sometimes that he was out of place in 20th-century America-that he thought that he should have been born in or been working at the turn of the century in France. And I had this vague recollection of-oh, turn-of-the-century France-I think that's those guys that Robert Clark had been talking about-Majorelle and Galle.

So I went back home after talking with Richard there, and yeah, okay, this is what he's talking about, and these are the guys who are doing this art nouveau furniture that is the look that he's sort of feeling-that Richard feels comfortable with. So that was an early interest in marquetry, because I like that marquetry look of what, particularly, Galle was doing, and it also is so different from [what] Wendell was doing in terms of kind of a delicacy of it. Oh, you're working with veneers-little tiny pieces of wood rather than these big hunks of material. We had to mill up 500 feet of stuff to make one table for Wendell, and you'd-it felt like a butcher shop sometimes. You go over to the band saw and hack off these big pieces of meat and throw them aside, because they were such weird shapes, you couldn't use them. They were nothing more than firewood.

So I liked the delicacy of the marquetry and-about the combination with the sculpture that Galle-I mean, that's what he did-he put those two elements together so beautifully. And ultimately I took a little harder look at Majorelle.

MR. COOKE: But not a later Roman sort of version.

MR. KOPF: That only came later. That only came later. That came at the time when-yeah, maybe Wendell was influential in that, too-of sort of that-

MR. COOKE: The late '70s.

MR. KOPF: -discovering that stuff for the rest of us. Oh, this is a look that is really attractive and perhaps is worthy of emulating in some way, shape, or form.

So I thought, maybe I can learn this marquetry thing, and that will be my signature-that that will distinguish me from the other people, because I just couldn't find anybody around who was doing that stuff.

MR. COOKE: I was going to say it's not on the radar in terms of contemporary production at that time. You really had to have some sort of historical avenue to have understood something about it.

MR. KOPF: Well, it's also not much a part of our American furniture. So that we don't have people who are skilled here in the United States. It's really much more of a European tradition. And yeah, so you had to have some sense of, well, what are the roots of this thing? And for me it was art nouveau. I didn't know anything about the Louis furniture at that point, or the Italian stuff, or anything, essentially, but I did know that I liked that art nouveau furniture, because it-I think because of the sculptural part that was so popular in that point-from the late '60s to late '70s, I suppose. And so that's the route that I was going to take.

MR. COOKE: So you figured that out and then you left Wendell's and-

MR. KOPF: No, I was still working at Wendell's at that point. Okay, this is what I want to do-and he actually had a scroll saw, and I got my-I remember it vividly-there was a veneer dealer in Buffalo, which was 60 miles away from Rochester-is 60 miles away from Rochester; I don't think it's moved-and went over there, and he sold me just a box of scraps of veneers. And that was so exciting to go home with that big box of essentially-

MR. COOKE: Odds and ends.

MR. KOPF: -junk. [Laughs.] And sort through it and, "Oh, look at this"-it was a little piece of veneer, three inches square, and you know how beautiful that is, and so on, and so forth. And at the same time I got a book on marquetry. It was an English book called *Art and Practice of Marquetry* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1971], by a man named William Lincoln. And I can't remember how I ended up with that book, but it's a super book.

MR. COOKE: Still have it?

MR. KOPF: Still have it, and he explained the craft in a really not-hobbyist way-I mean, it was somewhat hobbyist oriented, but he was also interested in the history and how to really do it well. And there were some photographs in that book that I found very inspiring as well.

I didn't have any tools, though, at that point, and Wendell didn't have the right saw blades either, and I also remember reading in the book-there was some mention of somebody in Toronto who was selling either marquetry supplies or veneer, something like that. And Rochester and Toronto aren't too terribly far apart, so I went up to Toronto one day, and met this guy, and got some veneer tape and saw blades, which were listed in the book as a requirement, and I think even a saw frame at that point-oh, no-I was using Wendell's power saw at that point. So all I needeed, essentially, in terms of special tools were the special saw blades and the tape, and obviously I needed the veneers to do it.

So I started out with what seemed to be an easy method for cutting marquetry in the book, and that is bevel cutting-it's forgiving in terms of making parts fit.

MR. COOKE: A fudge-factor friend.

MR. KOPF: Exactly. [Laughs.]

And then a couple months later, I had run out of tape and the saw blades that I had bought, and I went back to Toronto, and it actually turned out the man had died in the interim there, and the business was closed.

MR. COOKE: Do remember the guy's name at all?

MR. KOPF: Not at all. Not at all, but what I did have was the empty pack from the saw blades that told what the company was-it was a German company that made the blades-and the empty reel on the veneer tape and-that also had name of a different company. And I wrote to the German consulate and they put me in touch with the right people.

MR. COOKE: Wow.

MR. KOPF: And eventually I tracked it down and got the blades, because-as I said-

MR. COOKE: This is pre-Internet searching, you know. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Yeah, now you can do that easily.

MR. COOKE: And it was-as I said, it wasn't part of our American tradition here. So finding the tools-you really had to go to Europe.

Well, I mean, it was an interesting time because people were starting to pay more attention to Japanese tools at this point, but the whole European side of things, other than Danish planes-there was the Danish influence in terms of RIT and some of-woodcraft starting up at this point. But a lot of that-sort of the Continental work-was missing.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, yeah. And a lot of the good specialty tools and hardware and stuff like that that sort of raised the level of the craft at right around that time. It was an interesting time to be involved and see it all happening. *Fine Woodworking* was just starting publication.

MR. COOKE: Just starting in '75, yeah.

MR. KOPF: And they were there-I don't know if they were in Rochester, but John Kelsey had been at RIT as well, and-

MR. COOKE: Came through pretty regularly.

MR. KOPF: -so got to know all of those people, yeah.

MR. COOKE: So what was your first-did you just do a small picture at first?

MR. KOPF: I did a little box. Actually, my memory is that Wendell had attempted to do some marquetry. He had always been interested in doing some sort of production something or other.

MR. COOKE: Right, whether it's fiberglass, or whatever.

MR. KOPF: Right, something that was beyond the one-of-a-kind stuff. And he had had an interest in setting up another shop to produce little stuff-little boxes, pen and pencil holder-I don't even know what it was-stuff along those lines. But it sort of petered out and he refocused on-

MR. COOKE: Well, for that time, comes back and eventually with the icon, with Hunter, in charge. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Right, right. Exactly, exactly. So I believe that my first piece was a box that was sort of a leftover from what he was working on. A little box, four by six, sort of index card size that-I think his pieces were just going to be veneer, wrapped around with some nice veneer. So I took one of those boxes, as I remember it, and tried to cut out a flower to glue onto the top of it. And it was a pretty horrible looking thing.

MR. COOKE: Did you keep it?

MR. KOPF: No, it's-

MR. COOKE: To remind you?

MR. KOPF: -sort of wish I had it at this point, but I can still see it now. It had an East Indian rosewood with background, and the flower had six or seven parts to it. And it looked as much like an insect as a flower; it just didn't have much of anything to it. But it was a start. It was exciting to have something done.

MR. COOKE: Did you do any drawings beforehand, or was that simply from the materials that you had, instead of working with the veneers?

MR. KOPF: I honestly don't remember. I hope it was just working with the veneers, because it obviously didn't come out with any sense of planning to it.

Then I do remember making a larger box. I dovetailed the solid wood together and made a door, and I can't remember what the picture was on that. I'm going to assume that it was a floral thing because I still had that Galle mentality to it, that, okay, marquetry is floral. And I don't know what happened to that either. I think at a certain point I probably said, this so awful that no one should ever see this and-

MR. COOKE: Burn the evidence. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Burn the evidence, exactly. But I started making boxes, thinking that the boxes were a good thing to practice on because they were small and didn't have a whole lot of investment.

MR. COOKE: Mistakes occur, so be it.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly-so be it. Yeah, give it to somebody, or burn it, or whatever. So I started pretty small in terms-but I went back to that big box of veneer that I had gotten, and sorted them out, and gave me a chance to practice, and then also decide what wood combinations I liked with one another. So that was basically my start-making the little boxes.

MR. COOKE: So you knew the woods, or some of the veneers were labeled so you could gain some sort of familiarity.

MR. KOPF: No, they weren't labeled at all. It was if I like something, I could go back to The Woodshed-that was the dealer-and say to-the man's name was Lee something or other-Lee Jacobs. I could say to Lee, "What wood is this, and I'd like to buy a couple more square feet of it," or something along those lines. But I'm not even sure I did too much of that. It was a little bit of just looking at the colors and grain pattern in the wood, and eventually you'll find something similar.

MR. COOKE: Right. So you made a couple of boxes when you were still at Wendell's?

MR. KOPF: Yes, and a couple small pieces of furniture. Little cabinets, or a cabinet to hang on the wall, or maybe a cabinet on a stand-I can't exactly remember.

MR. COOKE: But did you-were you able to sell them?

MR. KOPF: No. No, I wasn't selling anything at that point, but I did think that the boxes were marketable. I got it down to where I could make them relatively quickly. I could make something with a flower on it-a pretty simple

flower, but a flower nevertheless-and I thought, okay, this is-I can give this a try.

So when I left Wendell's, that was what I did. I set up a small little workshop in Rochester and started that.

MR. COOKE: So you had enough equipment that you could do this?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I got to tell you-I got a used table, I got my own scroll saw, I found a press, had a jointer and planer, and a band saw, and that was about it. Some of the equipment I still have. I went shopping at a-and somebody told me about an architectural mill workshop that was going out of-or not going out of business, but they were decommissioning these pieces of equipment. So I got my veneer press there.

MR. COOKE: So that's where you go the big press.

MR. KOPF: That's where I got the big press, exactly.

MR. COOKE: So you started working small, but then you had big visions for the future. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Exactly, I had big vision. I knew I wanted to make furniture. I knew that right at the beginning, that I was hoping for that. It was kind of a matter of getting the skills. I felt like I had done some veneering-that was one thing that Stephen Proctor added, was some significant veneering skills, and bending plywood, and stuff like that.

MR. COOKE: So those vacuum veneering as well as press?

MR. KOPF: No, no vacuum; it was all in press with two-part molds. And so I thought I could construct a piece of furniture, but those first efforts were pretty amateurish.

MR. COOKE: So you set out on your own in '76?

MR. KOPF: Seventy-six, yeah. And stayed there in Rochester for two years and making objects for-making the boxes, trying to get them out there in little gift stores, like the one where I had seen Richard's first piece of furniture, making things for friends and family, and just trying to get my skills to a level that was reasonable.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: And that was a poorly defined term at that point. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Reasonable. [Laughs.] Reasonable skill.

MR. KOPF: For the whole field, I think, the whole skill level of everybody was pretty low, but there was an excitement about it, too, that we're all-you go back to that sort of alternative lifestyle thing, that we are discovering something new here, and so *Fine Woodworking* comes out with a new issue and-

MR. COOKE: People study up, exchange ideas.

MR. KOPF: -people are poring through that, exactly, exactly. And there were opportunities starting to show work. The craft fair world was just beginning.

MR. COOKE: So who was your network up there-were you-in terms of finding these gift shops or whether you applied to Rhinebeck [Rhinebeck Craft Show, Rhinebeck, NY] or Finger Lakes Exhibition [Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY]-some of the-I mean, who were you interacting with besides Wendell?

MR. KOPF: Well, Richard was there in Rochester, and there were a couple other people who had small shops at that point. Names escape me at this point, frankly. There was a cadre of people, though-mostly RIT oriented. And the school was still there. So there was the possibility-

MR. COOKE: But Shop One wasn't. That was the great retail outlet of the '50s and '60s.

MR. KOPF: Right, exactly. That was gone, but there were some people who stepped in, not at that sort of art gallery level, but more of a gift shop kind of thing. And so there was a place on the east side of Rochester that-a little gift shop that opened up in an old firehouse that was selling pottery and essentially craft work that local people were making.

And so I muddled along with that for a couple of years, and made a couple bigger pieces of furniture just to attempt to do it-cabinet desk-gosh, I'm trying-oh, right at that point, I was actually introduced to a gallery in New York as well-in Manhattan-and I can't remember the name of it-but they sold my first big piece of furniture. It was a folding screen with marquetry on it, sort of an art nouveau style. The frame of it was sculpted out of

walnut, and the background had a tree branch, and the ground had flowers and a trunk of a tree and chipmunks on it.

MR. COOKE: Were they showing other furniture?

MR. KOPF: They were showing other furniture, and I can't remember how I got to them.

MR. COOKE: It's not Fairtree [Fairtree Gallery, New York], or something like that?

MR. KOPF: No, it was a name that-they were down in SoHo, and it was there for just a very short period of time. But they put together this furniture show, and I had two or three pieces of furniture in there-maybe a coffee table, this screen, and maybe a cabinet. I can't remember exactly, to tell you the truth. But they sold the screen-I was just thrilled.

MR. COOKE: And what were [you] thinking about in terms of-you've been developing carcasses-were you looking at different people's work at that point? It's a time when the *Impractical Cabinetmaker* [James Krenov. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1979] and *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook* [James Krenov. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976] and all that, it's just starting to come out.

MR. KOPF: Wow, oh-forgot about that whole thing. Those books were-I pored over those books, too. When those Krenov books came out one after the other, I was like-and I think the [thing] about Krenov was that it was a lifestyle choice as well. Here's this guy who's doing this really neat looking stuff, and nobody else in America is doing that, but he's got an attitude about craftsmanship and whatnot, like that-he's not just making an object, but it's a whole package. And I think that really excited a lot of people at the time. That excited me.

I'm not sure that I ever was interested in really doing anything that looked like Krenov's work-I was still going back to that Galle and Majorelle thing. That was going to be my inspiration, because I felt like I did have some skills at shaping wood, not necessarily as a sculptor, in terms of realistic carving or being able to carve a hand, or a face, or a flower, or anything like that. But I could shape wood. That's what Wendell gave me-was that ability to get from here to there with a nice curve.

So those early pieces of furniture that I did all had that aspect to them of the shaped frame, and the realism was in the drawing of the marquetry. So like these chipmunks and what not. They were somewhat simple, relative to things that I was doing later, but they were nevertheless as realistic as I could get them, along the lines of what Galle was doing. I keep going back to that. I did get some books on Galle, and this is fabulous.

MR. COOKE: So at that point, you were starting to accumulate a-

MR. KOPF: A modest little library, yeah.

MR. COOKE: -a library to help you out in that. Because I was always curious, with your interest in the cabinet-in cabinet on stands, and things like that, sort of-that's one of Krenov's lineages-is sort of influencing that form right at that time.

MR. KOPF: I think my interest was different than that.

MR. COOKE: It is different.

MR. KOPF: It was that I wanted-the furniture was going to be a frame for the marquetry. So a vertical format seemed in order-a picture hanging on the wall sort of thing. But I wanted to get the picture up closer to eye level so that people could look at it. So that meant cabinet on a stand sort of things. Yeah, I remember fairly distinctly trying to design around that. Okay, how am I going to get this picture up to a level where people can see the detail and whatnot, and clearly the furniture for me at that point was a frame-albeit an elaborate frame, but a frame nevertheless for the marquetry, because I knew that that's what I was-that's what people were interested in. They weren't interested in my design or my-

MR. COOKE: Your technical level-

MR. KOPF: -furniture design. Yeah, my technical level -

MR. COOKE: -of construction-

MR. KOPF: -of construction, exactly. It was more that, oh, this marquetry is a unique thing that nobody else is doing. I'll return to that signature sort of concept.

MR. COOKE: That's my hook.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, that's my hook.

MR. COOKE: And were you thinking primarily of case furniture, really, at this point more than, say, tables or chairs, or were you involved in all three different forms?

MR. KOPF: No, I was pretty much-my memory was-no, I was doing some tables, too. I do remember doing tables early on, as well; but it seemed like wasn't as good a format for the marquetry, so I wanted to do freestanding cabinets and have that marquetry on that door-that was an early thing. An early elaborate piece of furniture that I did was a fall-front desk, and that was a way, once again, of getting the marquetry up at eye level. What I did decide-and there was a chair that went with that as well, but no marquetry on the chair-

[Audio break, tape change.]

-but what I do remember about that was that, boy, this is an awful lot of work to make a frame-[laughs]-for this picture. But I also knew that I didn't just want to make a picture to put on the wall. That just didn't appeal to me at all.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: So it had to be a three-dimensional furniture object.

MR. COOKE: So you're out on your own for those two years in Rochester, where you're sort of building up your library of images, a book from Galle, and what's your next move?

MR. KOPF: Then the next move was actually to get out of Rochester. Rochester is-

MR. COOKE: The gray days got to you?

MR. KOPF: Exactly. That's exactly what happened. It's a tough climate. I remember the first year that I lived there, there were 49 straight days without one minute of sunshine, from mid-December until the end of January. I mean, that's just unbelievable.

MR. COOKE: That's a long haul.

MR. KOPF: So my wife and I were looking to move somewhere else, and right at that time *Fine Woodworking* came out with an article on a school here in Easthampton called the Leeds Design Workshops. And it mentioned in the article that they were looking for people to be resident craftsmen as an example for students, and you'd have your own room and access to the machinery. So that sounded like a way for us to get to a more populated part of the country. I thought maybe I needed to-I wanted to leave the climate behind but also get into a part of the country that had more potential market outlet. Rochester is slightly isolated, being like six hours from Manhattan, or whatever.

So here is Easthampton, X hours from New York and two hours from Boston, and I thought, there's just more people living out there; maybe it will be a better opportunity. So it's a way to get-so I came out here to talk to the people at the Leeds Workshop and ask them if I'd be qualified and whatnot, and they said that would be fine. So it was a way to get to New England and then scout around and decide where we ultimately would like to settle, and here we are 26 years later-

MR. COOKE: Great.

MR. KOPF: -right here in Easthampton. I like Easthampton a lot, and that workshop was a great place for me to-

MR. COOKE: So was David welcoming right away?

MR. KOPF: David Powell was the director of the school and he had a partner named John Tierney, and they were welcoming. I think they were a little skeptical, because I don't think that my furniture skills were up to the level that they were looking for.

MR. COOKE: David comes out of the Cotswold tradition.

MR. KOPF: Exactly. He's a classically trained English cabinetmaker, and I was kind of a butcher. But I did offer this other wrinkle, the marquetry thing that they knew nothing about. And he wasn't particularly veneer oriented as well, so I was potentially going to offer that as well.

So I think that that sounded fine. I think their vision of the workshop at the very beginning was that they were going to have a diverse group of craftspeople offering different skills and it would be a place where a client could come and choose from this smorgasbord or stuff that-"Oh, you want something with marquetry? We've got

that." Or, "You like carving?" They were, hopefully, going to have somebody who could carve or somebody who could do upholstery, any number of things. It never really happened that way, but that was their original vision, so I think that I was one building block in that thing.

David was a pretty reserved, quiet guy, and I'm not sure that "welcoming" really fits him.

MR. COOKE: His style.

MR. KOPF: Maybe he was welcoming in his own-I mean, I got along fine with him, but I think that he was a little standoffish, that maybe my skill level was not quite-he didn't want the students looking at-

MR. COOKE: -at the way you were cutting dovetails and building up the frames.

MR. KOPF: Exactly. But I think, at the same time, I was ambitious about my own business to the point that, okay, that sounds attractive; that's something that they were interested in. Like, I had this relationship with this gallery in New York whose name I can no longer remember, so I was out there in a way that nobody else at Leeds was.

MR. COOKE: And then it was probably good for you just to sort of-again, being around the resources of people doing that kind of advanced technical work that you could sort of-it's like Stephen Proctor, you can just learn while you're doing your own-

MR. KOPF: I could be the guy like Wendell was, watching Fred or-

MR. COOKE: Or Krenov.

MR. KOPF: -or Krenov; do something and not have to actually show how ignorant I was. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: I learned a little bit. I mean, yeah, to some degree. And there was a bit of that. They were much more involved with the really basic teaching of craft skills for people as opposed to building things themselves. I was always a little bit disappointed with the modest amount of output that David actually had.

MR. COOKE: Himself did.

MR. KOPF: Yeah. It would have been more fun if he had been a little more ambitious about it in producing stuff.

MR. COOKE: In addition to passing along the knowledge.

MR. KOPF: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: So your main influence in some ways is still book oriented. It's not so much going to the museums. I mean, you hadn't traveled to Europe yet.

MR. KOPF: No, I hadn't been to Europe. I think I had a little bit of looking around. You know, you can find some of those things at the Metropolitan Museum [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY] or whatnot, but I guess-

MR. COOKE: At that point that Italian study [Francesco de Giorgio Martini. *Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio*. 15th century] wasn't installed, was it [at the Metropolitan Museum]?

MR. KOPF: No, that was much later?

MR. COOKE: Later?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, much later. Yeah, I wasn't familiar with that thing at all, other than through books. I had seen a picture or two in books on marquetry. As I mentioned, that Lincoln book, *The Art and Practice of Marquetry*, had a picture or two of that stuff.

Yeah, I think I was a whole lot more interested at that point of just-to use the musician's phrase-getting my chops down, you know, figuring out how to do this stuff and then worry about the style of the thing later. Those people were just way beyond me at that point.

MR. COOKE: I find that really interesting because there are so many people who come out of school and have this expectation of instant recognition, and you've got a sense, from doing boxes for family and friends or gift stores, of just, sort of-it wasn't so much the prestige, but it was built as a cumulative technical base in problem solving that you wanted to get up to speed.

MR. KOPF: Well, that's what interests me in furniture, or craft work anyway. It's the craft of the thing. And I think that's ultimately what I'm selling, is a technical skill, and if somebody thinks that it's combined with some sense of art, so much the better. But I was happy with the concept of being a craftsman. I think that fit in with some sort of alternative lifestyle self-image, or something like that. It wasn't necessarily super ego oriented; it was somebody who has shown some patience and caring about a tradition of some sort.

That goes back to that Krenov thing. I think that's where he was coming from, as far as I was concerned. I don't think his things were overly styled or artsy; it was simply a solid thing well done.

MR. COOKE: Yep. So what would you say-I mean, moving to Easthampton all of a sudden plugged you into a whole different world, in terms of not just Leeds and sort of the kind of energy that existed there, but what else was going on at that time?

MR. KOPF: Well, that first year was the year that I went to Rhinebeck for the first time as well, and that was a revelation. I still feel like those are my people, so to speak. These are people who were basically my age, who got into craftwork out of the same aspirations that I had had-I think a lot of alternative people are doing that-and a sense of exploration about what they were doing. You know, people were doing glass, ceramics, et cetera. That was a pretty exciting thing to experience, and also opened me up to more people who were out there in the furniture world.

MR. COOKE: Not just the Rochester-centric world.

MR. KOPF: Exactly, or Rochester-Easthampton, if you wish. And then Easthampton was extremely limited. So that was a real healthy thing, both in terms of actually getting out there and making things, finding out what the market wanted. You get some feedback that way.

I remember that first year going to Rhinebeck, and I had my jewelry boxes, and Rick Snyderman, a long-term friend who had a craft gallery down in Philadelphia [Snyderman Gallery], came by and looked at my boxes and said, "These are really nice, but look at what you've done on the inside, in terms of a lid support." And I just had a little brass chain on there to hold them up. And he said, "You put all this effort into this, and then you have a little ticky-tacky thing to do it." And I said, "No, but you don't realize; what I'm selling is this picture, and the box is just a vehicle to sell the picture, and so who cares about what the inside is?" That was my attitude.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: But he was right. He was absolutely right. It all has to be just the same. And so feedback like that gave me some sense of, okay, where are you taking this thing? Where are you going to-is it going to be a unified vision about what you're making here? And I still had the ultimate goal of making furniture. I didn't want to do boxes forever. I didn't want to do boxes at all, really, but they seemed to be a price point that I could actually find a home for things.

MR. COOKE: And as I said before, a scale that you can make mistakes-

MR. KOPF: Right, exactly. It wasn't a big deal.

MR. COOKE: -and it not be ruined as a result.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, right. Yeah, spend a couple months making a piece of furniture and then finding nobody is interested in it at all. And I did find that there was interest in the boxes. They were-I think it tapped into that crafty thing that was going on at Rhinebeck, so the people who came around were looking for something handmade by Americans.

MR. COOKE: Right, and affordable, to take home basically.

MR. KOPF: Right, affordable but still-bordering on expensive for what it was. So a jewelry box for $500, or whatever it was, was probably topping out at what you could find a home for.

MR. COOKE: What else-so that would have been '70-

MR. KOPF: That was about '78, '79, something around there.

MR. COOKE: -that you started in Rhinebeck.

MR. KOPF: Yep. And I did that for a number of years, and every year I would have fewer boxes and more furniture, and eventually the craft fair got to the point where my things were just too expensive for it. It was not impulse buying, like walking away with a $500 jewelry box, but people really had to think about that $3,000 coffee table, or whatever it was at that point.

So it just became apparent-I did make sales of furniture at the craft fairs, but it just became apparent that it was not as easy to do. And I found the craft fair circuit tough because, boy, you can sit there for days without making a sale, but then somebody-

MR. COOKE: Time away from the shop.

MR. KOPF: -somebody will come in and make your whole weekend with one sale, whereas, you know, you're watching the people who are making the coffee mugs across the aisle, and 25 bucks, 25 bucks, 25 bucks. So their graph is rising every 10 minutes, and my graph, well, I was flat-lined, but then I get a big jump at some point. But it did seem like, boy, it might be nice if somebody else were going to represent this work.

And I had been selling the boxes through stores like Rick Snyderman's place and whatnot, but some people were starting to offer the option of showing furniture in a gallery setting other than that one place in Manhattan that had been there for a year or year and a half and then folded the tent.

So Snyderman was one. I was part of a group show early on there. Oh, I forgot somebody: Dick Kagan.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I was going to ask whether Dick Kagan was instrumental-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, actually, right at that point he was real instrumental in helping me, and Dick ran a-Dick was a furniture maker in Philadelphia and had a little showroom out in the front of his building on South Street there [Richard Kagan Gallery]. And he was representing Wendell and a bunch of other significant players in the game, and was kind enough to represent me. And he sold several pieces at that point, and I honestly don't remember the timeframe. I think it was shortly after I came here to Easthampton.

MR. COOKE: That would make sense in terms of-what, he opened in '73, I think, and rented until maybe '79 or so.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, so-

MR. COOKE: It wasn't that long.

MR. KOPF: It was right around at the end of his run there, but, yeah, he sold a couple of things for me, and it was-and then I think Snyderman took over there in the Philadelphia in terms of showing furniture. And I'm trying to remember what other options there were for me at that point.

MR. COOKE: Did you ever-someplace like Ten Arrow [Ten Arrow Gallery, Cambridge, MA] in Cambridge that had shown any of Wendell's-

MR. KOPF: I did show some things there, but I think it was later. I can't remember. I remember the woman who ran the place-

MR. COOKE: Betty Tenmo [ph].

MR. KOPF: Betty-Betty, yeah-delightful person and seemed real pleased to show my work. I can't remember if she sold anything or not.

MR. COOKE: That was one of those places that was sort of the equivalent of a craft gift shop, and I was always struck by sort of Wendell's work being there at a point when, say, the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston was just starting to get going showing some of this at that time. It was really Ten Arrow that was carrying on sort of a tradition of Shop One-

MR. KOPF: Right. Well, I think that Betty had come from there.

MR. COOKE: And Betty was from Rochester.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly. I think that she had come out and seen that, but at the same time she did have $25 coffee mugs and whatnot.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: That's my memory, at any rate, but always with a little bit of an artsy, eccentric twist to it.

MR. COOKE: I was always struck also by Rhinebeck in terms of what it represented in the way of making people feel part of something larger, as well as-particularly in its early years in the '70s, there was a performative aspect of it as well, so people like [Mark] Lindquist, they're turning and creating this real excitement about the field, and it's amazing to see who was showing basically in an open-air facility.

MR. KOPF: I thought it was really exciting. I made lifelong friends there.

MR. COOKE: In all media.

MR. KOPF: In all media, exactly. And it was one of those things that was there for a couple of years, and then it couldn't sustain itself, for whatever reason. The thing got too big-

MR. COOKE: Well, it sort of became-it became more commercialized in some ways.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, but at the time it was-you know, we were comrades; we were there doing that thing, and there were buyers who were excited to come as well. That was the other aspect of it, that on the day retail opened-I think it was always on a Thursday-cars were lined up from Westchester County or Manhattan or whatever at 9:00 in the morning to get there and get the stuff first. You didn't want to miss that one glass object or whatever. Unfortunately there weren't too many people looking for furniture that way.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, there was just an excitement about the whole thing that was pretty nifty.

MR. COOKE: Where do you go from, sort of, your Rhinebeck experience and Snyderman-at some point traveling abroad to study any of this?

MR. KOPF: Not-

MR. COOKE: Not yet.

MR. KOPF: Not at that point. In 1984-or '83, I suppose it was-somebody turned me on to an article in *Scientific American*, of all places, about-it was written by two college professors from Baltimore, a husband and wife team, on perspective geometry in Italian intarsia panels from the Renaissance [Alan Tormey and Judith Farr Tormey. "Renaissance Intarsia: The Art of Geometry." *Scientific American* 247 (July 1982): 136-143]. And they sort of analyzed the perspective in it, and I had seen one or two pictures of this work earlier-I'd never seen any of them in color-and so here was this article that was pretty cool, and clearly these people knew stuff about this thing.

So I wrote them a letter and asked, you know, "How did you research this?" Because they weren't art historians; they were actually philosophy professors, and they just did this as amateurs in the summer. They'd go to Italy and go around and look at these sites. And so this *Scientific American* article was dealing with vanishing points and so on and so forth, and sort of suggesting that perspective-

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke, interviewing Silas Kopf on the rooftop deck of his studio in beautiful Easthampton, Massachusetts, on October 1, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, and this is disc number two.

So when we were reaching the end of our first disc, Silas, you were talking about having written the authors of the *Scientific American* article on intarsia. So-

MR. KOPF: It was a husband and wife team named Judith and Alan Tormey, and they lived in Baltimore, and I wrote them a letter and asked them how they found out about these Italian pictures, because I had never seen anything written on them at all. And they called me and we talked on the phone a little bit, and they said, "You know, if you're really interested in this, we're going to Italy here this summer, and would you like to come along?" Because they were proud of their research and happy to show things. So I was able to go for a week or 10 days with them, and we-

MR. COOKE: This is the summer of 19-

MR. KOPF: Eighty-three, I think it was.

MR. COOKE: Eighty-three.

MR. KOPF: And we had a little place to stay in a small town-a Tuscan hill town, and every day we'd-this was for a week. I mean, it wasn't a whole long trip, but a week. Every day we'd go off in a different direction and see different panels, and they knew where all the sites were. It was a wonderful way to travel and a neat way to see Italy, actually, to have a real focus like that. There's just so much there, that you can get overwhelmed by things.

So, for instance, when I went into the cathedral in Florence, we were just looking at the sacristy and the intarsia panels there. And, okay, forget the rest of it because we have other sites to see.

MR. COOKE: No bronze doors? [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Right, exactly. Well, you have to do a little bit of that. But it was really exciting to see that work and to see it up close, to see-or to try and discern how it was done. They actually made an appointment with a restoration individual who worked for the Italian government restoring these panels, and although he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Italian, Alan was able to translate adequately and had some understanding of how the panels were made, which was really exciting.

And so after I got back from Italy, at that point I thought-a lot of the pictures involve still life, or portrait is another thing. And I thought, I'm going to try some of that.

MR. COOKE: Right up your alley.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, right, from earlier on there. I'm going to try some of that stuff in marquetry because I think I can do it. And up to that point all I had done were these sort of Galle-Majorelle floral-type patterns.

So the first piece I did when I came back that had that as a concept was a self-portrait, where I created an illusion of a woven-not fabric but woven wood, with squares about one inch across, and making it look as if I had torn through the weaving and opened it up into an open cupboard. This is another concept that these Italian pictures had, was cupboard doors open to reveal the things behind it.

And I had also seen some-in Assisi there are some terrific portrait panels of saints, and I'd never seen marquetry done in a realistic portraiture sort of way, so I thought I'd give that a go, and that really-and I put it on a door of a cabinet, once again raising it up to eye-level height, and made the cabinet look as if it could potentially be sort of life-size, with me inside it.

MR. COOKE: Bursting out.

MR. KOPF: Exactly. And subsequently, I did a number of panels that were just more still-life oriented, and a bunch of those pictures with the open cupboards, because I really liked that look, and also people seemed to like it. It was a marketing plus to have that. It's a very engaging look, and works well in wood, too. So that was an exciting little bit of research to be able to do, and opened up some new things for me.

MR. COOKE: It seems like those 10 days really just opened you up for things that you still continue to explore-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly.

MR. COOKE: -in terms of floral, in terms of perspective, still life, the incorporation of portraiture, the trompe l'oeil aspect of your work, all seems to come right from that trip.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, absolutely. And I also think just seeing things in person makes a huge difference, because it can be intimidating to look at something in a book, and you're not quite sure of the scale or the detail or whatever if you just look at a picture in a book, and so to actually get up and scrutinize it, and then in my case trying to imagine, well, could I duplicate that? Could I reach that level of craftsmanship, et cetera, was key.

MR. COOKE: And you found it was easy enough for you to do it when you got back?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I think so. Well, I felt like my efforts were worthy of further exploration; that, okay, that was successful enough; I'm going to try that again. And actually, a piece that I did fairly early on in that trompe l'oeil style was a fall-front desk with open cupboards and a picture of a cat inside the cupboard [*Cat and Books*]. And that's one that I still like. There's a couple of pieces that I've made over the years that-I mean, that was in 1985, I think, and here all these years later I still think, wow, that's-

MR. COOKE: "I did all right."

MR. KOPF: -pretty pleased with that. Yeah, I look at a photograph of that and think, that was a successful object. And I don't always think that-[laughs]-when I look back at some of them.

MR. COOKE: A lot of that was based on firsthand observation of the final product. Have you ever talked to anybody in Europe about technique or-

MR. KOPF: Well, I subsequently got the chance to go down to the Metropolitan Museum where they restored the *Gubbio Studiolo*, which is this sort of masterpiece of that style of work, and the fellow who did-who oversaw-the restoration of that was really kind in showing me around and showing me the work and how it was done. And subsequently they've published a great book on how that stuff was done [Olga Raggio. *The Gubbio Studiolo and Its Conservation*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999].

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I've seen that book.

MR. KOPF: But that's as close as I've come to talking to someone about building that stuff. So it comes more from the restoration aspect.

MR. COOKE: So what year was that? Do you remember?

MR. KOPF: Well, you know, that restoration went on for about 10 years, and I got in about halfway through it, I'd say. A lot of it had been done, but there was still a lot to go, and the panels were just sitting sort of loosely around the restoration studio. And it's been finished and open to the public for four or five years now, something like that.

MR. COOKE: I was going to say around '90 or so.

MR. KOPF: I'm going to take a guess a little bit more than 10 years ago that I was there, but I'm not quite clear.

MR. COOKE: And then, when did you develop an interest-one can see that sort of direct relationship from the Italian work to the work you were doing in the mid-'80s. One of the other traditions I was curious with is the use of cross sections for that oyster shell sort of work, and where did you-was that another trip, or was that still just through book knowledge, or going through museums and seeing the Dutch work?

MR. KOPF: Actually, I had seen a picture in that book, *The Art and Practice of Marquetry*. There was one-

MR. COOKE: It's the bible.

MR. KOPF: -one piece, a little black-and-white photograph of an English piece. I think it was with laburnum oysters on it, and it sort of had-it looked like a sunflower, the way that they radiated-the craftsman made them radiate out from the center, and then there was a frieze down below that of directly-perpendicularly sliced oysters. And I had had an interest in that-from that, and actually I remember talking to Stephen Proctor about it when I was working for Wendell, and I made a little box with apple branch oysters on it, cut in hexagons and pieced together like a parquetry pattern, and Stephen at least gave me the confidence that I could do that. That actually might be a little box that I still have-or is still at home somewhere.

But that was my first go, but then I passed on that for years and years and years, and subsequently got interested in that through-it just seemed like a really economical way of dealing with wood. You're taking a product that is-

MR. COOKE: Small dimension-

MR. KOPF: -nothing more than firewood really-a branch of a tree that has no commercial use-and turning it into something interesting and neat, so I thought that was kind of cool. And I sort of returned to my initial interest in marquetry, of using small stuff, veneers rather than those big hunks of wood like Wendell was using with the stack-laminated work.

MR. COOKE: In some ways you could say you had reached your mature, confident level right around that-coming back from that Italy trip. Do you feel like you've added a contribution? Is there a way in which part of this is you're going back to the art of marquetry and remembering oyster marquetry and some of these others? Do you feel like you've had a chance to, sort of, find and chart a different niche as well?

MR. KOPF: That's a little hard to say. I'm a little bit jaded about what I'm doing at this point. But, yeah, for some period of time there I felt like I was pushing myself and pushing some sort of boundaries, you know, getting detail into a marquetry picture that appears to at least the uninitiated to be impossibly small and challenging that way. And it was things that I had seen in the Italian work or European work in general.

And so there was a certain excitement that I had about trying to go in that direction. I feel a little bit differently about it now, and that's probably healthy to have things wax and wane a little bit. I like the fact that I do return to stuff. I won't do a trompe l'oeil thing for a couple years, and then I'll do two or three of them in a row, or some just basically floral, art nouveau, something carved, and the furniture style gets into it to as opposed to just the marquetry thing. That's kind of fun for me. Or there is an aspect of getting my kicks out of it by, oh, let's try it that way again. I haven't gone there for a long time. Let's see what it looks like this time around.

MR. COOKE: One of the things that I remember noticing, particularly about the way you tackle problems in a sort of coherent fashion is-you know, for the longest time you're thinking about ways of framing the picture, in talking about cabinets, and a lot of that was rectilinear, and then there came a point in which you started doing oval desks and oval tables, and thinking about the piece that you're making right now that's got an oval end to it, does that relate as well to, sort of, thinking about strategies of styles of the furniture itself and framing it? Does it have to do with seeing these in a hemicycle fashion, in terms of the stories that are going around the pieces?

MR. KOPF: It has a lot to do with marketability, trying to sell stuff. So that's important to me. So I remember thinking this very distinctly early on: make the furniture simple and make the ratio of marquetry to furniture high. Now I don't necessarily need to do that so much. I can find homes for objects that are much more complicated in a cabinetmaking way. I also have had the good fortune to have really skilled people working with me.

So those things-that ratio changes significantly, and I'm actually much happier making the more complicated furniture thing. Obviously budget is a concern, though. Something has to [give], and so what's it going to be? What-the customer may well be making that choice. When I'm doing a commission, usually what ends up happening is that we come up with a budget and then work the design into the budget, whatever that may be, and the client may have to make some choices about what those extra doodads are on the thing. And usually it isn't in the marquetry thing. The marquetry thing is pretty much what people want, and so if there are compromises to be made, it comes off the furniture part.

MR. COOKE: But when did you first start working in the oval-in the round?

MR. KOPF: Okay, I remember your question now. The point is that that's a whole lot more complicated to build that.

MR. COOKE: Oh, yeah.

MR. KOPF: You know, anytime you deviate from 90 degrees, you ratchet up the hours significantly. So I was always happy to have things bend and twist. That's sort of that art nouveau influence there. So I can't-I'm trying to remember back about what pieces of furniture were significantly complicated in terms of, wow, that one really made us scratch heads and try and figure out what to do.

A lot of what I design and what we end up building are boxes in some way, shape, or form. We're putting plywood panels together with some sort of-in some way, shape, or form, and some of the plywood panels might be curved. There might be some solid wood parts like legs and whatnot, but essentially it's making a box. You know, a desk is a box. Cabinets are obviously boxes. Tables can be boxes as well.

MR. COOKE: I was kind of curious about some of the tables and desks where, instead of just having the front-fall front surface or the front door of a cabinet, that all of a sudden you're laying in marquetry, so it goes 360 degrees, all the way around some of those objects. And I thought that was a real interesting move.

MR. KOPF: Well, I would have always been happy to do that, because I think curves are fundamentally more interesting than straight lines. And so I'm happy to design around that, but as I say, it's just an issue of time; it complicates things significantly as soon as you do that. So it's always a little bit of back and forth about, okay, what's going to be the easiest way to build this thing and stay within some sort of budget that makes sense for either the client-or if I'm making the thing myself, I have to sort of think about, okay, what can I actually sell this thing for in the gallery to get my return out of it?

MR. COOKE: Sort of speaking along those lines, when did-and you've got Tom [Coughlin] working with you now for 10 years-when did you start getting somebody else to do some of the construction of the carcasses?

MR. KOPF: When I was over at the Leeds workshop, I had a nice situation because I could pick out the students that I both got along with and the ones that I thought were pretty decent craftsmen. So I had a series of people work for me for short periods of time who did that, and then there was one guy-his name was Tim Feiner-Tim had been a student at Leeds. He was from California and went back to California for a year or so and then called me up and said that he would be interested in working with me if I felt like I had the work. And I had a lot of respect for his skills, so I was happy to see if we could accommodate one another. And he came and he worked with me for seven or eight years here in Easthampton.

MR. COOKE: So you must have seen a real change in terms of either the output or the freedom to try different things.

MR. KOPF: I think that the craftsmanship stepped up a little bit. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Well, I'm just saying it frees you to really concentrate on the marquetry.

MR. KOPF: Absolutely, and I did. And I often tried to-it's a juggling act, when you do have people working for you, about finding that ratio of how much are you going to do and how much are they going to do? And so I often find myself designing a piece that-say it has a whole lot of marquetry in it. I almost have to design one parallel to that that has a whole lot of cabinetwork in it, so I can keep Tom busy on his project while I'm working on mine, so that over the course of six months or whatever we end up in the same place at the same time, both starting fresh again.

So I do a little bit of that juggling, and I'll deliberately add stuff to a project if I think, you know, I don't want Tom standing around twiddling his thumbs, that he's got to be doing stuff. And even just adding stuff into somebody's project that, sort of, I'm going to eat, because I want him busy. But we get a better product in the end, so I'll add those little doodads of one variety or the other that maybe weren't in the budget to begin with that, okay, I've got to keep Tom busy for two weeks here on something.

MR. COOKE: Do you do any of that design work collaboratively or is this pretty much-

MR. KOPF: No, I do it all. So my ratio of work is that I manage the business, meaning that I deal with the client, I do the design work, and I do the marquetry. Those are the three components that I have, and I very rarely anymore do any of the cabinetwork. I mean, occasionally I'll find it worthwhile to step up and pick up a plane and hack away on something.

MR. COOKE: So did Tom take over for Tim then?

MR. KOPF: There was a hiatus of, like, a year or two where I, again, had people through Leeds who worked for me for a year. There were two of them in the space of two years that filled in like that.

MR. COOKE: But it's much better to have that kind of continuity-

MR. KOPF: Oh, absolutely. I have a great relationship with Tom now. The nice thing when you have somebody that's worked with you a long time is you have a library of stuff that you can go to, so-and I'm not big on drawings at all, on technical drawings in terms of constructing furniture. So I'll give him a sketch on paper with some dimensions and I'll say, "Remember that desk that we built in oak? This is going to be built like that." And he'll say, "Okay, I understand," and off he goes. And he's pretty independent in the way that he works that way, and being in the same room, if he has a question, he can come over and ask me.

But I'm amazed at the number of times that the furniture object-like I said, it's just boxes that we're building. They might be complicated boxes with curved parts and so on and so forth, but they're a little more than that, so that, like, if we build a desk, there might be two pedestals to it, and those are boxes, and the outside shell might be curved all the way around, but we're still making a box. And so it's real easy to say to Tom, "Put this together-make this panel and then join this to the leg, and on the inside you're going to have a false panel that's going to hold up a drawer," or so on and so forth. And so the vocabulary becomes quite simple in terms of the discussing how things are built.

I was just down at the Metropolitan to see the [émile-Jacques] Ruhlmann show ["Ruhlmann: Genius of Art Deco." June 8, 2004 - September 5, 2004] that's down there now, and talking to the conservator there, and it was interesting to see that that furniture is done pretty much the same way. I mean, she was confident that from piece to piece it was essentially built the same way, that the vocabulary that they use to add legs to cabinets was carried on from piece to piece to piece, and it does make the shop work-well, you try to keep the head-scratching down to a minimum for people.

MR. COOKE: Exactly, and you can keep the flow of work consistent.

MR. KOPF: You can also estimate how long it's going to take, if that's the case, that if, you know, if we built this desk with rectilinear parts, it's going to be X hours, or make an estimate, and if I curve the parts on this, which the customer may like, it's going to add a certain percentage, and once you've gone through those steps a number of times, you sort of, okay, I understand this now.

MR. COOKE: Right. It becomes second nature in some ways.

MR. KOPF: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: So you started using Leeds people right from the start, sort of '79 or so?

MR. KOPF: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: One of the other things that's quite striking in terms of your activity is getting involved with WARP, the Woodworkers Alliance for Rainforest Protection. When did some of the activism in that kind of broader community come in, and what was the impetus behind that?

MR. KOPF: I remember reading an article in some science journal when I was in Rochester about rainforest issues and deforestation, and feeling like, you know, I'm not using very much of that stuff, but how comfortable am I in contributing at all, and is there anything I can do about it? So it's kind of [been] in the back of my mind for some time, and not long after I got here to Easthampton, I decided-I remember reading another article about rainforest issues, that there's a place in Costa Rica where people had purchased land to set aside a reserve, and I thought, you know, hey, wouldn't it be a great thing if we North American woodworkers could make a

contribution in terms of some sort of conservation, that we're using the forest products and here's our payback for that, and feeling like, well, the burden shouldn't fall on the craftsmen's shoulders but ultimately on the consumer, but let them know that they're involved in this issue as well.

So I came up with a concept of telling my customers, you choose the woods that you want, but if you want to use some tropical timber, then I want to add the value of that timber onto the project as sort of a tax.

MR. COOKE: A luxury tax.

MR. KOPF: A luxury tax, if you wish, exactly.

MR. COOKE: Environmental tax. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: And that money would be pooled and we would then do something with it-you know, donate it to World Wildlife Fund or somebody who's involved in conservation and feel like we had made a contribution.

So I approached people-I think it was at *Woodshop News*-about this as a concept and they wrote an article. So I got a little publicity about that, and I was ultimately contacted by a fellow named Scott Landis, who is now a dear friend of mine, who was also interested in these issues. He had just gone to Peru and written an article for *Fine Woodworking* about forest stuff down there. And a couple of people-it was in the air at that point.

MR. COOKE: So this was-do you know? I want to say, like, '82 or so, but I'm not sure.

MR. KOPF: I think it's a little later than that, but I honestly can't remember.

MR. COOKE: Okay. Perhaps even mid-'80s.

MR. KOPF: Eighty-five. It's a little hard for me to say. Scott would know. Scott's been at this forever.

MR. COOKE: Okay. I'll go back [to] my WARP issues.

MR. KOPF: So he brought a bunch of us together who had expressed an interest in this from all around the country and from timber interests and furniture makers, conservation people, et cetera, and came up with an organization. And the first thing the organization did was to say, "We've got to educate ourselves about what's going on here," because it became clear that this concept of having a reserve, like I had initially thought, was probably not the way to go with it, that there had to be some other way of dealing with it.

The upshot of it was that we got very involved in the idea of sustainability, and what is sustainable forestry stuff, and certification then, so that somebody goes into a forest and looks at the forestry plan-how many trees are being harvested per acre, et cetera, and is this going to be sustainable into the long term? And if somebody is willing to do that, then that would become certified in the way that, say, organic farming-you can go to the supermarket and buy carrots that are certified organic, and you probably pay a premium. So that comes back to my tax concept, that the customer ultimately has to pay for this green-greenishness, if you wish. And that program is still going on, and I feel real good about WARP-WARP was the Woodworkers Alliance for Rainforest Protection-their role in creating this certification process and the Forest Stewardship Council.

Subsequently, our efforts as little consumers and producers and whatnot was outweighed by the need for a marketing organization to deal with bigger concerns like Home Depot or just big buyers, bigger producers beyond what we do. So our organization then morphed into the one part of the program that we all really liked, who were the small producers, was called Greenwood, and that was using low-technology methods to build chairs by local people.

And so a program was set up to train chair makers in Honduras, the idea being that if local people are making their living out of their forest because they need the timber to make chairs, they're less likely to cut it down and will take care of it. So this has been an ongoing program to send North American woodworkers down to Honduras to train these people in low-technology methods, you know, using pole lathes and draw horses and whatnot.

MR. COOKE: That transformation sort of took place sort of mid-'90s, '94, '95, somewhere in there.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, the program has been going on for eight, nine years, something like that. Brian Boggs and Curtis Buchanan are the two chair makers who have gone down. I'm still on the board of directors of the organization, and it's moving ahead. It's a struggle financially sometimes, but I think we all feel really good about what we're doing. It's a program that just has so many pluses.

MR. COOKE: I just remember when-I always associate you with WARP and *Understory*, that publication that Scott edited, and how important that was in the late '80s, just laying out the issues that sort of connect the self-focus

of a shop to this larger world in really rich and significant ways. And I always felt like you were somehow one of the real driving forces behind that, just consistently kept it in people's consciousness. And curiously enough, as someone who is using marquetry-you know, the least amount of tropical woods in some ways, or using it in interesting ways, which is really what was brought up in the exhibition-the "Conservation by Design" exhibition [Rhode Island School of Design. 1994].

MR. KOPF: For that I made a desk out of oysters for that particular pieces, and of a tree that was knocked down here in the neighboring town of Holyoke from a significant storm that passed through. And people called me up and asked me about-said they had this tree down, was I interested in the timber? And I went over and took a look and I said, "Well, I don't think the timber is what I can deal with, but I will take a bunch of your branches and cut up the oysters from that." So that felt really right to me. It was a Native American wood that was a tree that was already knocked over-you are not cutting down anything-and it was literally just firewood.

And the exhibition was important. I was really involved in getting that going, which was an interesting experience on a number of levels, and I think there was a great catalogue produced from that, some nice essays, and I hope there is some impact out there. I think people are concerned. I mean, sometimes it seems tough to put the onus on the craftsman-you know, particularly the guy who isn't making super luxury objects-to tell him, you know, it's not mahogany; you shouldn't be doing that. I don't want to be a finger-pointer that way, but if I have an opportunity to do something different, that seems okay with me.

However, at the same time, if I am going to do marquetry, I am pretty much stuck with using tropical woods. You just can't get around the need for all of those colors and figures. So I continue to do it. If I could find a source for-

MR. COOKE: So you are assuaging your guilt is what you are saying. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Yeah, sure. Guilt is a great motivator. If I could find a source for certified veneers to use in my work, I would be happy to do that, because as with the original program of the tax, the cost of material is pretty damn modest in terms of whatever I'm making-you know, it's labor. And so it would be pretty easy to pass that along to the customer, to build something out of-something a little more expensive, meaning certified, or something that we could all feel a little bit better about. And I'm just interested in seeing the market enhanced. If nobody buys something, markets are going to wither and die. So if you feel strongly about it, you have got to get out there and do it yourself. If you want to see organic farming in your neighborhood, you better go to the supermarket and buy organic. It's just as simple as that.

MR. COOKE: You are very aware of the marketplace, and I would be curious to get your thoughts as someone who started off in gift stores, went to the Rhinebeck Craft Fair, and what that was in terms of a sales vehicle, and then ultimately found representation not just in Snyderman in Philadelphia, but New York galleries like Henoch [Gallery Henoch, New York, NY]. I think, as I was telling you earlier, you are probably the one with the longest-standing relationships in New York. And just to try to get your sense, is this something that sort of happened, was this a conscious decision, and what you see the tradeoffs each of these-you know, are there pluses and minuses for each of these three different sectors-the gift shop, the craft fair, and the gallery?

MR. KOPF: Well, each one of them is stepping up in price and, you know, so the gift shop has a low price point-well, you could do that at the craft fair as well, but at least Rhinebeck was a little more upscale. So at the gift shop level you are really competing for somebody's dollar. You know, they are buying a birthday present for somebody and they are looking for something unique and interesting, but they only want to spend $150, or whatever it is. And at the same time they are looking at that silk scarf or whatever it may be.

At the craft fair venue there is a little bit of that, but there is a little bit more of a sense of collecting, that-okay, I'm really-it's maybe not a gift item; it's maybe more like something for themselves. Maybe it's a husband and wife around shopping for a coffee table or something. But there is a little bit of competition there as well, because at the craft fair they have got 100 other people to look at-or maybe not 100 other furniture makers, but maybe 10 other furniture makers, and they are looking at this coffee table versus that one and price and those sort of considerations.

Once you get into the art gallery thing-well, I'm always unclear about this. How much does price really matter? If somebody really wants something, they are buying something that is clearly unique and they are buying it as a collectible. I trust that in the back of their minds people have that sense that, you know, I'm buying something that will be a museum object somewhere down the road, or if my eye is sharp enough, somebody is going to care about this 50, 100 years from now. Maybe people don't make that selection really based on that, but that is the presentation of the art gallery, to do it that way.

And so the price thing becomes a bit more flexible. It doesn't necessarily-or at least for me-it doesn't come down to a clear hours-material equation that you come up with a number that way and then the gallery has what they want. There is a little bit of looking at the object relative to other things that have been sold in the past and where do we think this thing stands in the whole thing. So some objects you might make a little more money on,

some a little bit less, but it all sort of needs to add up in the end of whatever amount you think you need to get out of it. And that is the way that I have sort of found the art gallery thing to work.

You know, there is something nice about the fact that-well, you have got a monopoly. In terms of markets, you have got a monopoly. If they want to collect your object, they either pay it or they don't. And that is why people can get absurd amounts of money-well, maybe not absurd-I mean, it's a market. I accept the market as a legitimate tool for selling things. I mean, what I might think is absurd for a painting, somebody else has said, "Yeah, it's worth $5 million," or whatever, and therefore that is what it is worth.

So my thing is constantly been to-well, I have got a couple of things in terms of marketing. I mean, obviously I want to maximize the amount of money that I am getting out of something, but I also-you don't want to stretch yourself out so far that you have killed your market, so there is that balance. You know, like, if I get into a cycle with the gallery show that I will make a bunch of pieces for the show, hopefully they sell, or enough of them sell, to make it feel comfortable, but then after the show-then you get into a thing of making commission pieces.

And so when you are in the commission mode, it would be nice to be able to stay, from my standpoint, you know, six to eight months out-maybe 10 months out-so that you feel like there is some security. But you are not five years out, because if you are five years out, you probably priced too low. You should raise your prices so that you drive some of those people away to get back to that-

MR. COOKE: Management flow, right?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly, and then hopefully when the eight to 10 months are up, then you are ready to start the cycle again, to make showpieces again. And so what you don't want to do is to have prices that have deterred the commission work that keeps you on that eight-to-10-months-out thing.

MR. COOKE: Except for you, the notion of the gallery and the commission is perfectly compatible and is necessary to keep both of those going.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, one thing plays off of the other, that if I had-the gallery is necessary to show the new work-the speculative pieces-so that if I had never worked with a gallery and just continued to make those jewelry boxes, well, that is what I would be doing, but at a certain point stretch out there and try something new. And so that first portrait piece becomes that thing. If somebody comes into the gallery and sees it-I had no idea. I had no idea that you could do a portrait. I always thought it [was] flowers or do something in metal-a bowl piece, or whatever it may be-an oyster piece.

And so I use the gallery show as a way of stretching myself a little bit, and sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. You know, sometimes you make some flunkers [*sic*] that are challenges to sell. Sometimes I try to have fun-systematically have fun with an object, and I think they are kind of fun, but somebody else's sense of humor may not be mine. I did a piece quite a few years ago that had silhouettes of rats on it-a series of rats-and I thought it was just kind of fun. It was, like, one rat was chasing the other-it was as if they were going up the spiral, and boy, that was hard to sell. [Laughs.] I realized-

MR. COOKE: Some people don't like rats.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, people didn't want rats in their house. It was not a good theme, particularly in New York City.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, cockroach cabinets-

MR. KOPF: I did that. I did that one. I did my vermin series. I had ants and cockroaches, too. I just had to fulfill the whole group.

MR. COOKE: It also strikes me, given the way you work in part of a broader community-say, here in Easthampton or you talk about Rhinebeck-is that the gallery is sort of a subtly more impersonal way, and a commission gets you back in touch with people-sort of the to-ing and fro-ing that seems like that is part of what you do that is important.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, the downside on the commission pieces are that 90 percent of them are based on something that has already been built. So if somebody looks through the portfolio-"Oh, I like that piece, but could you make it longer or higher or in a blonde wood instead of a brown wood," et cetera, et cetera. And that is okay-I mean, that works nicely in a certain sense, because you know exactly how long it's going to take, and so it's a secure sort of thing. So rarely does the individual come forth and just give you a blank slate to design something. I find that actually really hard, but I don't find it hard to just design the blank slate thing for myself. If I'm going to be doing it and putting it out there as a show piece, it's a matter of-I mean, these things are self-indulgent for me. It's like, what am I going to have fun building and-

MR. COOKE: "What challenge do I want?"

MR. KOPF: Yeah, what challenge do I want, and tempering that with, do I ultimately think I can sell it? Or would I mind having it myself if I couldn't sell it?

MR. COOKE: Keeper, right. One of the things we were talking about at lunch is also-talked about your outward-directed behavior in terms of workshops-doing workshops on marquetry. When did you start doing-you know, spreading the word in terms of your technique, and what was the impetus behind that?

MR. KOPF: I started right about the time that I came here to Easthampton, that people had seen my work. You know, maybe it was around Rhinebeck time, that somebody saw it and said, "Oh, would you come to our crafts school and do a workshop?"

MR. COOKE: Did you ever demonstrate at Rhinebeck? Because as part of Rhinebeck, they did have demos.

MR. KOPF: No, I never did that. Yeah, I know. No, never did that. But it sounded kind of like fun. There were places that I had heard about, like Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] and Anderson Ranch [Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, CO] and all the-Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], but oh, I would like to do that. And once again, it was part of a community. You know, it was like, these are craftspeople, these are my people. [Laughs.] And so I did feel like, yeah, I would be happy to be involved in that, and so I did a number of those every year for a long, long time, as much for me as for the participant. It was a way for me to get out and see new parts of the country and just do stuff.

But I reached a point about four years ago, and I remember it specifically. I was at the Anderson Ranch in Snowmass, Colorado, where I had been going for years. It's just a gorgeous place, and Wednesday afternoon rolled around and I thought, I would like to be out hiking here, and yet I'm teaching. [Laughs.] And so I kept looking at the clock and thinking, you know, I think these people are doing okay here. So I did take off early the next day, but then I felt guilty about it. These people paid to have me there and to have me there 100 percent, and I'm giving them 75 percent, and if you feel that way, you just shouldn't be doing it, you know? Do it 100 percent or don't bother, and if you want to go on a vacation, just go on a vacation, but don't make the pretext of it going to a workshop somewhere to teach somebody. I violated that the next year when I went to Hawaii, though. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: You have your exceptions.

MR. KOPF: I did have that exception. There are a couple other places where I think I might do that. But, yeah, I just sort of got burnt out on it and-

MR. COOKE: It's a lot of effort.

MR. KOPF: It is a lot of effort.

MR. COOKE: And a lot of intense effort-not just preparation, but then also following through with people and just really close instructions.

MR. KOPF: Well, one of the hard parts was that it's not just the week you are away teaching, but then there is the coming back and figuring out, where the hell was I, you know? I have got to get-and there is kind of a half a day of scratching your head and trying to get back to that, and you tie that up with the day ahead of time to make the preparations-you know, get the slide show together and so on and so forth-it was just a quite a bit of work.

And also I was never clear that it was really-had the payoff per hour. I mean, the gratification would come if you had students who really picked up the ball and ran with it, and I'm not sure you get so much in the workshop setting.

MR. COOKE: In the summer workshop.

MR. KOPF: In the summer workshops, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Do you ever go to any of the academic schools like RIT or RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] and do any demonstrations there?

MR. KOPF: Just for an afternoon-just give a slide show and a quick demo, but never to really do, you know, teach a semester or something like that. I never did anything like that, no.

MR. COOKE: Yeah. It's obviously the way a lot of this information is exchanged-you were talking earlier about *Fine Woodworking* and being established in the sense, or the feel of, sort of, all feeding off one another. What is curious is that in some ways, you continue to make advances in marquetry, but few people follow-or you staked

out territory that is really your own.

MR. KOPF: There are good parts of that and bad. One thing that happens, I think, is that if people are interested in learning furniture, the marquetry thing looks like a different thing all together. And so if they are trying to learn furniture, they want to know how to cut a dovetail and a mortise and tenon and so on and so forth, and, boy, that marquetry thing-you know, it's kind of intriguing, but maybe somewhere down the road.

MR. COOKE: Another life, right?

MR. KOPF: Another life, I'll try that. And that is my guess about it. I'm not entirely sure. There are a couple people who have done it. Rick Wrigley did some terrific designs with marquetry on them, and occasionally I will see some other people who do a little something with it, but I can't think of other people who have made it the focus of every piece that they do out there.

MR. COOKE: One of the things that I'm always curious about is if you had your favorite pieces. You have made reference to the fall-front desk with the cat in it or perhaps one of your self-portraits. What do you consider sort of-and maybe you can talk about each of the four or five, sort of, monuments of Silas Kopf's work.

MR. KOPF: [Laughs] I got a-

MR. COOKE: Not that your demise is imminent here. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Well, they come in sort of different areas, like the trompe l'oeil thing. I would say that the piece with the cat was a high watermark. In terms of the floral work, I got commission to do a-and this was one of those commissions that was open-ended. The guy didn't tie me down at all, and he has been a great client to work with. I designed a long, horizontal cabinet for him with doors on it that were a garden scene with mixed flowers and a birdbath and birds and tree branches, and it's as elaborate a piece of marquetry as I have ever done [*Garden* cabinet]. The marquetry picture itself was about four and a half feet long and maybe 25 inches high or something like that.

MR. COOKE: When did you do this?

MR. KOPF: About five years ago or so, maybe a little more than that. Tom was with me. Seven years ago, I'm going to guess, maybe. And he really let me go. He had a good budget and I just-I was really proud of it. It was one of those pieces that would be the equivalent of my going to the Louvre [Paris, France] or something or other and looking at that stuff and say, "Well, no way; I'm never going to be it; I'm never going to get there." And I hope that someday people look at that piece and say, "Wow, that guy really"-as much as anything, it was time, you know? I just put a lot of time into it. It's not any more involved than, you know, a smaller floral picture like that one I showed here earlier, but it just has-it has 20 times as much as that.

MR. COOKE: It's the breadth of it. Does that ever bother you in terms of something like that-that it's a private commission that you hope it gets out into the public domain at some point?

MR. KOPF: I can't think about that.

MR. COOKE: I was thinking about that comment about the Louvre and that you would hope that somebody would go and look at that at some point.

MR. KOPF: Well, I guess I do think about that, because I have thought here recently in the last couple years, I have only got so many pieces that I can build for the duration of my career, and I had better make them good ones. So I try to steer clients into interesting stuff, or make stuff that I feel like is museum quality, that ultimately somebody is going to find that sort of value in it that they are going to say, this is worthy of somebody looking at, not as a piece of-well, as-I'm not quite sure what I'm trying to say, but along those lines. Yeah, I think they are-I'm trying to make special objects. There are commissions that I probably wouldn't take just because it just isn't stretching me or-

MR. COOKE: I mean, one always wonders whether you get at a point in your career where you feel like you have brought it along this far, and then you do-you think about your legacy. You know, it's both within a workshop notion about, are there other students who somehow are being inspired by what I am doing and are willing to try this out, or is my work going to be in the public domain in some respects, and thinking of it that way.

MR. KOPF: Well, I do think that about not every piece, but a lot of them that I think somebody is going to have an interest in this someday, that it will be a cool thing to look at. You know, I get that reaction now, and so I hope in a hundred years, it will elicit that sort of thing, too. And the Lord only knows what technology might have wrought over that period of time that will make this even more interesting in a way. And I get kicks out of looking at things in museums that-

MR. COOKE: Glad that they are there, right?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly, and they should be inspirational in some sense. You know, I like museums that are set up for me to go and look at.

MR. COOKE: So we have got the cat desk-trompe l'oeil desk. We have got this other garden.

MR. KOPF: The *Garden* cabinet, and I made a piece-a portrait piece-1989 or 1990, somewhere around there-a self-portrait of me inside a cabinet that looked like a brick chimney, and I call it *Bricolage*-that is the French word for handyman work.

MR. COOKE: [Claude] Levi-Strauss's bricoleur. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: Exactly. And I was happy with that, both as a portrait-you know, I think it worked-and as a piece of furniture, I thought it worked satisfactorily. I mean, that's oftentimes the thing for me-does the marquetry enhance the furniture and does the furniture enhance the marquetry? Making those two things in the design phase ratchet up together is what I'm trying to do. Oftentimes there will be a marquetry concept and the furniture doesn't necessarily lend itself to that. So it's a matter of me either-okay, abandon that marquetry concept for another time, or make the furniture come up to that in some way or another, and then maybe the furniture design outstrips that and you have to go back and re-jigger the marquetry part.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: I did a portrait of my father, as well, on a mirror, and I thought I was happy with that as a portrait. Maybe there was emotional content to that that surpassed other things, but it's fairly hard-you know, it's hard to do marquetry portraits, just because you are limited in the shapes of the pieces of wood that you are doing. So can you really get emotional content out of it that surpasses just the awesomeness of the fact that it is done in wood? I'm always fighting-not fighting that, but that is a thing that I think about.

MR. COOKE: Well, I think that is the easy thing to be seduced by material and the technique.

MR. KOPF: Right, right. So did that thing-you know, I felt like that one worked for me and-I would almost have to get my portfolio in front of me. And these things change, too. Things that I liked five years ago are, like, you know, it's okay.

MR. COOKE: On the outs now, right?

MR. KOPF: Exactly. So maybe I will feel that way about that garden cabinet at some point, but who knows?

MR. COOKE: Well, one thing is, if it's seven years out, then there is something to be said about that. I'm just always curious how people look back, even in the recent past, at their own work, and there are ways in which we oftentimes have that kind of reflection, thinking, boy, you know, I really hit it that time; I really feel as if that really met all the criteria that I was looking for at that particular moment in time.

MR. KOPF: Yeah-

MR. COOKE: The way you were talking about the cat desk-

MR. KOPF: I often think it's safer, though, to give it a little bit of time and look back at it somewhere down the road. The other thing that I tend to do, just as a design thing for myself, is whenever I finish something, look back at it and say, okay, what would I do differently next time? If I had to fundamentally build this thing again, what would be different, and oftentimes that will temper the satisfaction of the piece. It's like, eh, you know, I didn't like that aspect of it. So it's 90 percent there, but I wish I had done this, that, or the other thing. But that's healthy. You know, I think that is healthy to sit back and have a little bit of disgruntlement with the progress.

MR. COOKE: Right, self-criticism or skepticism-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, yeah.

MR. COOKE: -or something like that. I mean, it is curious-when did you do your first self-portrait?

MR. KOPF: It was that one, the breaking through the wooden fabric, and then I did-but that was just sort of half a face. It was, like, one eye, as I remember. It was not a whole portrait. I did a coffee table with a picture of me on top of it [*Primal Woodworking*], and I was-it was inspired by being at a local nightclub and listening to relatively quiet piano music, and they had some raw vegetables there to eat, and I had a piece of celery that I was sort of gnawing on because I didn't want to chomp into that and be too loud. And I'm sort of gnawing away on this thing and holding the celery stick and thinking, this is a weird picture of myself doing this. And I drew a picture of

myself then as if I were gnawing on the branch of a tree like a beaver or something or other, feeling like your teeth are your original woodworking tool for shaping that little bit of-

MR. COOKE: Right. The edge tool par excellence, right?

MR. KOPF: Exactly. And that was the second self-portrait that I did.

MR. COOKE: It is a theme, you keep returning to at different times, like the Wilsonart one at Toronto with shaving and the mirror. ["Furniture 2000: Old and New Communities." Wilsonart Laminate. The Furniture Society. Ontario, Canada.]

MR. KOPF: I have been trying to do them every year, or two years, and watching myself get grayer and balder and perhaps a little bit fatter, and I think it would be kind of a kick to bring them all together at some point.

MR. COOKE: It would be fabulous.

MR. KOPF: And at the same time, I try to-they are speculative, because who the hell is going to buy something with my face on it or order something with my face on it, other than my mother? [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: And so I try to vary the furniture objects accordingly. So I sort of have in the back of my mind-

MR. COOKE: So you have got a cabinet, you have got a table-

MR. KOPF: I have got a cabinet, I have got a table, I have got-gosh, I have got to think of these things. Well, I have got several cabinets, and I have somewhere I'm just sort of peripherally in the thing.

I had someone who ordered a cabinet based on the Italian Renaissance trompe l'oeil thing. And I said, "Well, you know, when the duke ordered these things-the Duke of Gubbio-he had objects that were special to him placed in the cabinet, or looking like they were in the cabinet." And I said, "What do you care about?" and she said, "Oh, gosh, my husband and I drink wine and"-"Okay, I'll put a wine bottle in"-"And I went to Mt. Holyoke college, and if you could put that in somehow," and so there were various things. And so I put a portrait of myself as if it were sitting in a frame inside the cabinet, like it was a family portrait or something or other, and I think I was even wearing a Mt. Holyoke baseball cap, but I can't remember.

MR. COOKE: Great.

MR. KOPF: Stuff like that. But I have done about 20 of them. I did a cuckoo clock where instead of the little birdie coming out on the hour; it was my tongue coming out on the hour.

MR. COOKE: You haven't done a self-portrait chair-seating.

MR. KOPF: No, I haven't, but I would love to do it. It will be coming up.

MR. COOKE: It's coming. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: [Laughs] It's coming, exactly. So, you know, sort of looking at that as a metaphor of my furniture design over the years, too. I think if I reassembled them, there would be kind of an interesting look. I mean, part of my design thing is that I'm pretty eclectic. I don't have one look. I'm not-I'll do the art nouveau thing and six months later, I'm in a deco phase or a Louis XV or who knows what.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: I don't mind jumping around like that.

MR. COOKE: What was it like working with Steinway, in terms of the piano commission and sort of the-a lot of the hoopla over that?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I have done four pianos for them now, and they have-the first one was in its own way the most interesting, because they were a little nervous about it and I was, too. I didn't want to commit myself to a price on something that I was-I mean, I sort of could figure out how long the marquetry would take me to cut, but I didn't know how long the piano construction would take because of just having not done that. And I was concerned that maybe I would want to build it one way and they would say, "No, no, no, you can't put a piece of wood there," because something else has to happen, and it would cause me headaches.

So they were ultimately really great to deal with. I enjoyed working with them a lot, and I sort of look at the

pianos as so restricted that they are kind of interesting. It's like writing a sonnet or something or other, where you have got this rigid format that you have to-

MR. COOKE: Parameters that are given.

MR. KOPF: -you have to plug into, you know, and work on that. So if you didn't want to fool around with the acoustics of it at all, you were stuck with that box-you know, that weird-shaped box-and probably having three legs and a lifting top and so on-you know, all of that stuff that a piano has.

So, it was a design restriction, but one that I kind of enjoyed in its own way, and I was real happy with the product in the end, with all of them that I have done. I mean, there are things that I would change about them if I had a chance to do any of them again, but actually, I think the first one was the most successful in its own way.

MR. COOKE: Was it a useful marketing tool at all visibility-wise or anything? Is it just more the exercise?

MR. KOPF: I don't think you can ever tell. Like they say, no publicity is bad publicity. So I did get some press on it, and so ultimately, all of those little things add up. But I didn't have anybody come to me and say, "Boy, I saw your piano and I would like to commission a piano myself." Well, actually, I did, I did get a piano commission. But, "I saw the piano with the morning glories and I would like a cabinet done like that," or X, Y, or Z-that just didn't happen, but I think, ultimately, all that stuff adds up to some sort of buzz that is worthwhile.

MR. COOKE: Did you get much of an after-effect from the show at Milwaukee ["Skin Deep: Three Masters of American Inlaid Furniture." Milwaukee Art Museum. November 22, 2003-March 2, 2003], where you were compared to an early 19th-century furniture maker using inlay and marquetry as well as a later 19th-century marquetry maker? What was your experience in that?

MR. KOPF: Well, that was a fabulous experience. I mean, what a great opportunity get your work shown in a great setting like that, plus to be in the historic context was pretty neat. I didn't-as of today, I haven't gotten any obvious work out of it or clear feedback in some way, shape, or form, but again, I think those things all add up to-

MR. COOKE: It's hard to see a linear cause and effect.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I mean, it would be nice if you could see that, but gosh, it was just a great opportunity for me to show the work there, and so I was thrilled and pleased that people lent their work for the exhibition, and to be put in that context. That was good fun.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I thought it was good. It's always useful to take somewhat of a historical perspective and just sort of take stock of where you are in relation to all of this.

MR. KOPF: Well, I think that would be nice. I find that actually to be one of the downsides on the type of work that I'm doing. You alluded to this-there aren't other people out there doing it, so there is no comparative thing going on. People aren't out there collecting the guys who make marquetry. Either I fit into the studio furniture thing or not, and since we don't have an American tradition for marquetry, people aren't looking at it in that context, or they aren't out there looking at 10 people who are doing similar sort of work and saying, "Oh, he's doing the best of that."

MR. COOKE: Right, it doesn't appear-

MR. KOPF: That's just not happening for me. There are pluses and minuses to being sort of a solo act.

MR. COOKE: What is your sense as someone who, sort of, came through, self-taught in some ways, with a little bit of schooling? Is there a tension in the world between the self-taught, the alternative lifestyle, and someone who is coming out of the academy now, now that there are a number of these programs that are up and running? Not that you have to weigh in on one, but what do you see the two different-the paths into the field, sort of strengths and weaknesses?

MR. KOPF: Well, I think there is something exciting about being-you know, my friends who were at RISD or BU [Boston University] or RIT or whatever, people that I subsequently have become pals with-I think there was a-I missed out on a little bit of that stuff, that there was an excitement about being in a group like that that was probably a plus, but I certainly value my opportunities of being taught within a more commercial structure. I got to watch Wendell out there making furniture, and clearly he-I mean, he was trying to maximize his income, and I think ultimately that is important. That is important to me, to feel like there is a market aspect to this, and that is my problem with a lot of schools, that they don't-

MR. COOKE: Impractical.

MR. KOPF: They don't get people doing that sort of stuff, but-

MR. COOKE: Somehow they come out without that sense that they should just be trying to build up their skill level and speed and things like that.

MR. KOPF: Right, right, right. So there's good parts and bad to the way people are schooled so-yeah, I guess you would have to give me an individual, things to look at and say, "Well, was that a successful outcome for those people?" I guess I wouldn't have had a different way. That seemed to be the right thing for me to do at the time.

MR. COOKE: But as you tell it all out, it makes a lot of sense in terms of learning and asking and getting pointers and suggestions here and there and sort of building up a cumulative career in some ways. And I think one of the other things that is really quite noticeable is that sense of giving back as well, in terms of-whether it be workshops, whether it be work, whether it be the ways in which you are thinking about commissions in working with people-there is always that sense of being fortunate but then giving something back.

MR. KOPF: Well, I like feeling part of the community, you know?

MR. COOKE: Well, that came through in terms of living in Easthampton and everything.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I mean, I feel great about being part of this artsy scene going on here in Easthampton, and whatever I can do to enhance that or, you know, any number of things. Community is really important to me.

MR. COOKE: Do you ever think you will just give up the marquetry and go into drawing or something different?

MR. KOPF: No. I can't envision that at all. I see myself as making furniture, and, barring some sort of physical calamity, that-you know, eyesight issues or injury or who knows what-I can't see retiring even. I hope I can carry on making something-there is something pleasing about making something. At the same time, I would say it doesn't have the same excitement for me as it did 20 years ago. I'm just-

MR. COOKE: You are older.

MR. KOPF: I'm older-you know, hey, the weather is nice; I would like to go out and play tennis or something or other, whereas at a certain point, I was pretty driven. And I think in part that was because I saw-if I were to chart myself on a graph that started at zero, and after one year I climbed up the ladder to a certain point, and I saw my graph steadily rising. And then at a certain point-I think it was economy related-you know, 1990 or something or other, the economy soured and it's like, whoa, I'm not selling anything here now. This is-what is going on here? And I just sort of realized, you know, your graph is not going to go on forever here, and so what are you killing yourself about here?

MR. COOKE: So when you do think that was?

MR. KOPF: I think it was around 1990, but I can't remember for sure.

MR. COOKE: Sort of a dwell on the market.

MR. KOPF: I had a show that was a complete flop.

MR. COOKE: At Henoch?

MR. KOPF: At Henoch, and I had had, like, two shows before that that were successful to the point that I did think, boy, I can just raise my prices and I can make more interesting pieces-don't restrict yourself by, you know, making simple cabinets and coffee tables-you know, really go for it. And I put that stuff out there; I worked forever on the pieces, and it was, like, one piece out of 10 sold, and I took a look around and said, oh, man, what am I going to do now? I have tried it in New York; I can't bring it to Hartford and hope to sell these things; what on earth is going to happen now? And that was a real wake-up call, in two ways-don't put yourself out emotionally that much.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: I mean, I thought, this is it, I'm on my way, I'm going to-[laughs]-have all kinds of opportunities and making more money and so on and so forth, and it didn't happen, and I said-and it was months of being, sort of, shell-shocked. And gradually, the pieces did sell, but it took a long time and I just said, don't do that to yourself again, it's not worth it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: You have got a nice little thing going here; just be content with that and don't shoot for the moon.

MR. COOKE: Have you seen any other patterns in the field in terms of the growth in the '70s and '80s and, sort of, a depression in terms of marketing in the early '90s? Are there other turning points?

MR. KOPF: Well, you mentioned the gallery thing. I feel fortunate to have a long-term representation at a gallery. I mean, the gallery scene for studio furniture is pretty miserable, and that is not a good sign. It's not a good sign that there aren't people excited about collecting, and I understand it on some level. I think furniture is just a tough collectible. It's not like a glass object that you can display easily, or you can shuffle them around. You can put the glass thing in your closet and bring out another one, and six months later exchange them and feel like, you know, I have an exciting display that way. You buy a furniture piece and, man, it's there.

MR. COOKE: By and large it stays.

MR. KOPF: It's there, and once people have decorated and filled up their houses, they are not buying. They are just done.

MR. COOKE: It's a tough medium in that way.

MR. KOPF: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: What is your-with that kind of perspective and experience-what is your sense of the field? Is it in a healthy place right now, even without [a] gallery?

MR. KOPF: No, I don't think it's healthy.

MR. COOKE: Or do you worry about it, sort of, hemorrhaging?

MR. KOPF: I don't think it's healthy. I see people dropping out-people who have been at it for quite some time just saying, "This is not working for me anymore; I have got to do something else," and so that is not good. Yeah, I just don't feel a buzz and an excitement out there, either from makers or buyers or retail people. There is a little bit of that stuff going on, but not enough.

I guess the other aspect of it is that I think that that time that brought people of my age into the field was really unique in terms of that alternative lifestyle stuff, and that is done. That world just doesn't exist anymore. I think it's a shame. It could come back. You know, maybe there will be a whole new generation of kids who come up and decide that they have got a sense of idealism about their lives in the world that I think motivated a lot of my friends and maybe motivated me. And maybe it's right that it's gone, you know. Maybe we were all-

MR. COOKE: That is always one of the things-I know I have been talking to Peter Korin [ph] about are we on the backside of a hump-you know, that this was a moment.

MR. KOPF: Well, the plus is that-and I think this is-I think about marketing quite a lot, and I think that we are so fortunate here in America to have such a wealthy society that there is disposable income to have luxury objects, and there is no way of getting around what any craftsperson is doing-or almost any craftsperson is doing-is a luxury object, that there are machine-made objects that will perform the function-

MR. COOKE: All the function is there.

MR. KOPF: -satisfactorily at, you know, a tenth or a hundredth of the price or whatever. So you have got to appeal to that thing, but the plus about having an industrialized society is that it has just created phenomenal wealth as well. And so people are presumably-I mean, they have got to do something with it. They can do any number of things with it. They can do maybe more socially responsible things than buying luxury items for themselves. And I have wrestled with this aspect of it for a long time, like, what am I doing here? Am I catering to people's base instincts to accumulate and acquire more stuff, and stuff that they don't essentially need?

MR. COOKE: Are you contributing to the destruction of the environment, right?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, all of that sort of stuff.

MR. COOKE: So what is your answer?

MR. KOPF: Well, if I have one at all that I will give you-and it's the one that I rationalize things with, and it may well be a rationalization-is that I am maintaining a historic length with some sort of tradition in the past, and I think that is important. It's important to know where your roots are and so-

MR. COOKE: A tangible.

MR. KOPF: There were guys in ancient Egypt who were fashioning wood objects and putting them together and

decorating them for a pharaoh, and, you know, I look at that sort of thing as my ancestors and these Italian Renaissance guys making things for the pope or the duke and-

[Audio break.]

-and, you know, [André Charles] Boulle making something for Louis XIV, et cetera. We are all kind of in the same thing, but, you know, I think our culture is a little bit richer for having maintained a link-some sort of a link with that life. But that-

MR. COOKE: And not a virtual link either.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, not a virtual link, but some sort of reality, and I appreciate that there are people of good will who want to patronize craftspeople out there to keep arts alive, and presumably it does enrich our lives in some way, shape,s or form. But catch me next week and I'll say, "This is all a lot of crap."

MR. COOKE: But I wonder whether there [are] a number of people who are purchasing it who might feel the same way, that they are supporting some sort of continuum of small-shop custom work. Yes, there are some people who are buying it as commodity in terms of wanting a piece of yours.

MR. KOPF: Well, I think that is the best reason. If they are buying-I think I mentioned this earlier-if somebody is buying something for investment purposes or whatever, thinking that in 20 years this is going to be the hot ticket, well, that is a foolish way to go about any of these sorts of things. But, yeah, the only realistic way of doing it is [to] say, "I'm spreading the wealth around here a little bit, and I think that this endeavor is worth supporting." That seems to make some sense to me.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, I think that is one of the ones, and then the other thing that-the power of objects-of domestic objects-oftentimes being associated with memories, and how does memory get poured into these as receptacles of memory, which you can't control but might actually come about if it's on view somewhere and somebody encounters it and has an association with that time, place, or whatever, or looking at the objects and it might sort of bring something back in their own memory.

MR. KOPF: Yeah. Well, that is that cultural stuff that seems to make sense. I think that people do appreciate that. Actually, the domestic thing is kind of interesting. If you look back at the Egyptian stuff and whatnot, it's like we are peering into lives gone by and trying to figure out-yeah, these are our ancestors; they are what got us to where we are. That stuff is important to look at. It's maybe a little highfalutin for me at times, but occasionally I like to sit back with a glass of scotch and think about stuff like that. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Over a lake in Tennessee.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, exactly.

MR. COOKE: I'm just curious, as somebody who has been successful in the New York gallery scene, why do you suppose that has been? Because, you know, Wendell had the occasional representation there and it never really was sustainable. A lot of people will say Peter Joseph got established in New York, and ultimately didn't go anywhere, that Pritam & Eames [furniture gallery, East Hampton, NY] caters to some of the New York market, but a lot of these people end up selling in places that are non-New York and people will think of art in industry instead of being more representative of what New York or the Design Fair, something like that. Is New York more of a design world than a craft world?

MR. KOPF: Well, it may work out well for me to be at Gallery Henoch, because he is basically a painting gallery-he has changed the focus a little bit-but at a certain point he was photo-realist. And so my work as a pictographic image sort of fit in with that stuff, and so maybe his clientele gravitated to that, and I know he sells things of mine to people who have no idea about the studio furniture thing at all.

MR. COOKE: And may not have other pieces in their own homes.

MR. KOPF: And may not have other pieces, exactly. So that may have been a plus. I mean, I might have-I didn't have the opportunity for other representation in New York or I might have thought that was worthwhile. The downside on-it's just like the marquetry thing in general. You are the only guy out there-there is a good part and a bad part to that, and the bad part about being the only furniture guy in the painting gallery is that, well, one, you got a monopoly, but two, maybe nobody has anything to compare to-maybe they are not interested in that at all.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: So I dabbled with other situations, but ultimately, I think it's a personal bond. I like the guy who runs the gallery, and we are friends now after all these years. I mean, I have been there for, I don't know, 18 years or

something like that, and I just feel like we are pals, and that chemistry matters more to me than other things. And if it isn't the best representation, well, so be it, you know. It's what I'm comfortable with, and ultimately, that is what I care about-my personal comfort level.

MR. COOKE: How do people talk about [your work]? I mean, are you ever there for openings and hear the New York art world talk about it? One of the things I'm always struck by is sort of-it's like the design-it's not an art exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt [Smithsonian Institution, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, NY] right now, where people will look at that or Wendell's stuff and say, well, it's not good furniture, it's not good sculpture-you know, they are trying to do too many different things. What do you get of feedback from New York?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I get a little bit of feedback. I mean, I have never been reviewed in a major publication or anything so I don't-I'm not aware-

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Silas Kopf up on the roof of his studio in Easthampton, Massachusetts, on October 1, 2004. This is disc number three.

And Silas, we were just sort of wrapping up a little bit about how the New York art world perceived your pictorial work, and you were talking about sculpture and furniture tensions and trying to think about what is happening with marquetry furniture and painting-realist painting sorts of tension.

MR. KOPF: I feel like there has been very little relationship with the art world in that sense. I feel lucky to have a New York representation because it's the marketplace for the world, so I'm getting people who are coming in and at least seeing things from all over the world and buying them from places far afield. But it's a little hard for me to imagine that anyone is going to look at what I am doing and thinking, oh, this is really cutting edge, avant-garde sorts of stuff.

And, you know, I continue to feel like what I'm selling is-don't want to get too much into the art and craft debate, but I'm heavy into the craft. I think I'm a good craftsman and that what I do is interesting because of the level of skill that goes into it, and that if somebody finds some art content in it, either that it's an interesting furniture design or there is an interesting pictographic concept, so much the better. But I'm not too terribly concerned about that. I'm trying to make a product that-well, it's self-indulgent to some degree for me.

I'm trying to have fun myself-pretty good with these show pieces when we are talking about the gallery world. So put something out there and see what people think about it. So when I'm at an opening and people are talking about it, I think they are generally looking at it like, "I had no idea anybody did this anymore."

MR. COOKE: Right, especially in America.

MR. KOPF: Right, exactly-"I haven't seen any of this since I was in Paris or Italy," or whatever. So I'm getting a bit of that reaction, and that is a sales thing.

MR. COOKE: And do you think that sort of association elevates it, as well? I mean, it becomes much more distinctive as a result. It's both a negative and a positive-negative that you have got the niche all by yourself, but positive in terms of the fact that you do have that distinct signature.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I think that I'm where I sort of set out to be 30 years ago, both looking at what Nakashima was doing as a signature sort of thing-well, I'm lucky to be the guy who has a signature. I think that when people see my work, that they don't have to see a name attached to it. They know it kind of early on-"Oh, there is that wooden picture guy again."

MR. COOKE: Right. [Laughs.]

You have talked about Italy and France. We talked about your experience in Italy, but it might be worthwhile as well to talk to me about your experiences in France. When did that occur?

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I had gone to France on vacation, maybe 1985, something like that, and one thing that I wanted to do-there is a marquetry book in French by Pierre Ramon, and I had seen the book and bought it and read it as well as I could with my mediocre college French and looked him up when I was there. And I was delighted that he told me that he was familiar with my work, that he had seen it through *Fine Woodworking*. And I was intrigued with all of that French furniture-it's kind of the high-water mark for marquetry.

MR. COOKE: Marquetry and boulle and all that.

MR. KOPF: Exactly, exactly. So I had said, you know, "Someday if it was possible, I would like to come over and

spend some time." And he was very gracious and said that would be-he would see if he could make that happen. In 1988, I got a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and I thought, well, here is-I'm going to use that and go to Paris. So I contacted him and asked him if I could come, and I said, here's the three things that I want to learn how to do: I want to learn how boulle is cut, I want to learn how packet cutting was done in the 18th century to make multiple copies of things, and maybe one more thing was on the list. And so he said, "Sure, come on over." And I had a limited amount of time-I couldn't leave my family for that long-but it took two months, and went over there and he became a terrific friend and showed me these things. The other thing that he did was he got me into restoration workshops in Paris, got me into the museums, et cetera.

And, boy, that-in the same way that going to Italy-going to France and looking at boulle work-I mean, André-Charles Boulle's work-close up, I went away with that sense that-well, I had the sense in looking at it in photographs that this is just too much. You know, no way could I ever possibly do that. But boy, when I got there, looking at it close, I said, you know, this is just hours. It's all doable-simply a matter of putting the number of hours into it.

MR. COOKE: Time, yeah.

MR. KOPF: And I said, I can do this. And that was so liberating to feel like that. You know, if you feel like there is somebody over top of you-to use some sports metaphor or something or other-I could never hit Sandy Kofax or whatever, and finally you get up to bat and you hit a single, it's like, whoa, I did it, I think I can do it again.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: And so that boulle thing-or not the boulle thing-but the French marquetry, the Louis, Louis, Louis was like, man, this is just too much for me. But I came back from having seen it and said, I understand how it was made-that is what the school did for me there-and therefore, knowing how it was made, I can do it. I can do it myself.

MR. COOKE: Right-got enough experience, enough skill.

MR. KOPF: And then I just put all that stuff aside-don't worry about it anymore, and a lot of it, I think, is just hideously overdone anyway, so take the best part of it. Take the technical skills to produce something like that, and twist and turn it into your own thing.

MR. COOKE: So was it at that time that the Getty Conservators were over there, too? Because I think Brian Considine and some others were-

MR. KOPF: They were a little bit after me.

MR. COOKE: -were working on gilding and boulle work and all sorts of things.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, Brian came a couple of years after I did. He was there much longer than I, ultimately helped Pierre translate his book and so on and so forth. Yeah, I was one of the earlier Americans to go over there.

MR. COOKE: And the one who is not a conservator. Everybody else, it seems to me, is much more into the conservation-Getty money has a lot to do with it in terms of getting that collection ready for exhibition again.

MR. KOPF: There is a guy in San Diego who went and spent some significant period of time and does marquetry as Pierre taught it, and he runs a little school there [Patrick Edwards, The American School of French Marquetry]. The thing for me was-actually, the real liberation was learning how that French marquetry was cut in the 18th century, and then going back and saying, my method is better. My method that I sort of-no, I didn't invent it, but I feel like I-

MR. COOKE: Cobbled it better.

MR. KOPF: I cobbled it together out of that book *The Art and Practice of Marquetry*, and saying to myself, I can do better work-you know, I just-it's a better way of going about it. And so I think the plus of being here in America as opposed to being in France is that there isn't that heavy weight of tradition on top of you that-

MR. COOKE: Must do it this way.

MR. KOPF: -you can't get out from under the way, exactly, that you can be a little bit freer here in terms of the way that you go about something. Ultimately, it's a matter of what comes out the peppermill at the end. Is it the pepper that you want, or is it coarsely ground or something like that, and so I don't care how somebody gets to something if ultimately it's put together in a craftsmanlike way. I don't care if they gnaw it out with their teeth-that was sort of my metaphor with that portrait piece. I really am down on people who are so technically oriented that they are just stuck on this is the way that you have to do it and any other way is clearly wrong.

MR. COOKE: So is that the way the Italians and the French still are, that you didn't get a sense of anybody as a practicing marquetry person in either of those countries-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, I did.

MR. COOKE: -doing anything other than straight reproduction work?

MR. KOPF: That isn't quite true, but I think that the tradition is so strong that it's really tough to make something else happen. From a marketing standpoint, too, the potential clientele is probably stuck on that traditional look as well. So people probably naturally gravitate toward either reproduction or restoration work for their craft skills, and we don't have that here, so that is a plus.

MR. COOKE: Could you envision any other trips to-I mean, would you ever go take a look at Russian work?

MR. KOPF: You know, that is so French oriented that-

MR. COOKE: That it's basically the same.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, it doesn't-I mean, I would like to see it, I suppose. There are some-I suppose if there were one thing to see that would be completely different, it would be Asian things-you know, go to China or Japan, Korea, and see maybe not how marquetry as such is done but inlay-that is all sort of in the same ballpark-maybe India. But it's not in the cards here in the short term.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, some of the Indian stuff that they inlaid, ivory-

MR. KOPF: Yeah, it's awesome, but I bet it's awesome in the same sort of way-

MR. COOKE: It's the time.

MR. KOPF: It's just time.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. KOPF: And particularly in the Asian societies, labor is cheap enough that somebody could-you know, the shah could commission that stuff, and if it took years and years-oh, man, there is a table in the Uffizi in Florence [Galleria degli Uffizi] that is inlaid stone-*pietra dura*-and when I was Italy, I went and saw that, and I thought, that is unbelievable. It's an octagonal table in black marble, and all of these semiprecious stones inlaid in the top. Everybody else is-I mean, it's an Art 101 course on the wall, but this table-you people should be looking at this. I went back and looked at it twice because I just couldn't believe it, and I ultimately read that it was 20,000 man-hours to build the thing. I mean, that is, at a 50-week year, that's-

MR. COOKE: Staggering.

MR. KOPF: -ten years or whatever it is.

MR. COOKE: Or an army of guys.

MR. KOPF: Yeah, well, that is what it was. I'm sure it was lots and lots of people working on it, because they wouldn't have taken that sort of time, but it is ultimately just time.

MR. COOKE: Well, that is great. Thank you for being able to-it has been a pleasure talking with you.

MR. KOPF: My pleasure.

MR. COOKE: With the wood picture guy. [Laughs.]

MR. KOPF: [Laughs] It has been fun. Well done.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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