

# BOB FLEXNER, CRAFTSMAN

By Eve Sandstrom

He was just another academic with a social conscience, but a funny thing happened on the way to his professorship. The '60s campus radical found peace and fulfillment in a storefront woodworking shop on Main Street.



Bob Flexner says he was 36 before he figured out what he wanted to be when he grew up—and his career choice surprised even himself.

Flexner turned from an academic into a craftsman. Today, he is becoming known as one of the nation's leading experts on furniture restoration and repair. And he's using many of the same skills he relied on as a historian and teacher.

Flexner's background includes:

- Bachelor's and master's degrees in history from the University of Oklahoma, plus extensive work toward a Ph.D.

- Four years in the U.S. Navy.

- Time as a peace activist, including a stint as editor of an underground newspaper on the OU campus.

- Two years on kibbutzim in Israel.

- Two years in a Danish woodworking shop.

- Twelve years of operating his own woodworking and repair shop in Norman and several years of teaching his

craft to both amateurs and professionals.

- Three successful "sweat equity" house deals.

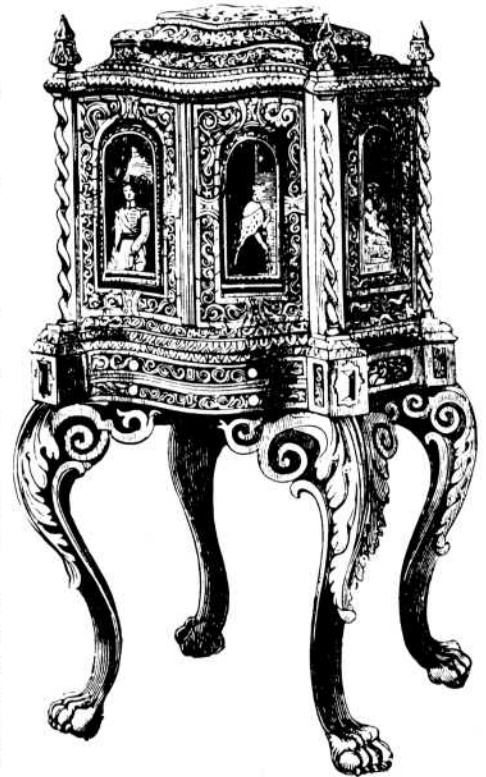
- Two prize-winning video tapes on furniture repair and refinishing that could, Flexner thinks, change the craft in the United States.

Flexner is proud of his links with the counterculture of the 1960s, and a bit nostalgic for that era. The '60s, he says, gave him permission to turn away from the "white collar" life and discover what he really enjoyed doing—then do it.

Flexner thinks a lot of men would like to make that choice. "On the kibbutz, where everybody is paid the same no matter what his job is, the most popular job is the machine shop. That's because men like to fool around with motors. When they can choose, most men will pick a job that means getting their hands dirty."

Flexner was born in Oklahoma City in 1940. Both his parents were college educated. Their three sons were expected to go to college, then enter a profession or go into business. Flexner followed the pattern. He went to OU and in 1962 earned a bachelor's in history, specializing in Russian studies. He was commissioned through Naval ROTC.

The Navy sent Flexner to Washington, D.C., where he and his wife bought a house. Built in the teens, the house had two floors and a full basement. The couple set out to remodel it.



"I'd never lifted a hammer," Flexner says. "Oh, maybe I did take shop in junior high — and hated it."

He bought books and learned by experience. "I even gutted the top floor and rearranged all the rooms," Flexner recalls.

By 1966 Flexner was single again and out of the Navy. He returned to OU to work on his master's, intending to become a history professor. But OU wasn't the same campus he had left four years earlier; protest had replaced Big Red football as the favorite OU game. Flexner plunged into the turmoil, becoming editor of an underground, anti-war newspaper.

His memories of the era of campus ferment are fond.

"I consider myself a '60s-type intellectual radical," he says. "I'm still trying to be true to those ideals."

International events also had impact on Flexner's career at OU. In 1967

Israel fought and won the Six Day War.

"The Six Day War changed life for all Jews in the United States," Flexner says. "It made me conscious of my own Jewishness, though I had never been particularly religious."

After completing his degree, which included a thesis on American Zionism, Flexner left for Israel, pledging to work two years on kibbutzim.

At the first kibbutz, he asked to work in the carpentry shop. "I knew everything about carpentry, right?" He grins. "There were five men, and I was number five, the one who swept out."

At this kibbutz Flexner met and married a Danish girl, Birthe, who also was working there.

"We moved to a pioneer kibbutz in the desert. It had just been established and included about 60 families. All of them were younger people. And I was the only carpenter," Flexner says.

"Since all these people were young couples, there were lots of kids, and we had to have a kindergarten. A contractor from a near-by town built the building, but I built all the furniture."

"It wasn't terribly sophisticated, but — well, it wasn't just nailed together. In retrospect, it was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot, but I learned by looking at things and imitating them."

He grins again. "Not knowing what I was doing, I thought I was pretty good."

Flexner was happy on the kibbutz, but his wife did not want to live in Israel permanently. They agreed to try living both in the United States and in Denmark. In 1970 Flexner, his wife and their first son, Erik, moved to Norman. Flexner received GI benefits and became a graduate assistant. They bought a small house with a VA loan, and Flexner undertook another major remodeling project, with his wife as assistant carpenter and head decorator.

By 1974 Flexner had passed his written and oral exams for a doctorate in history. The Flexners, who had added son Soren to the family, decided it was time to carry out their plan to try living in Denmark.

Using profits from the sale of their Norman house, they bought an old store in the middle of Copenhagen. It had been a vegetable store, Flexner says, and included a three-room apartment behind the store and a full basement. The Flexners began to turn it into a comfortable apartment. Birthe took a job as a lab technician, her orig-

And I spoke Danish! I went off to my lacquer room the next day all excited." His path back into college teaching seemed to be open.

But lightning was about to strike.

"At 11 o'clock in the morning, I'm spraying lacquer in my little finish room, and the image of the academic atmosphere — as I had known it in

**In Israel, Flexner felt appreciated. "It took me six years to realize the reason I was so happy there was not Israel, but because I was doing what I like — woodworking. That's when I decided what I wanted to do with my life. I was 36."**

inal field, and Flexner began learning Danish so he could find a teaching job.

But Flexner quickly discovered two things about teaching in the cultural climate of Denmark in the 1970s. First, he needed a degree from a Danish university. Second, the Marxist influence in Danish universities would have required him to at least verbalize Marxist leanings.

"I certainly wasn't a Marxist," he says.

With his teaching plan frustrated, he turned to his back-up trade and looked for a job in woodworking. He found those jobs few and far between, except in one area—finishing.

"There were five jobs open in Copenhagen for a finish man, spraying lacquer," Flexner says. "Nobody wants to do this job."

He found work in a shop that built furniture for schools. The 16 woodworkers in the shop were friendly, and they had the European pride in craftsmanship, an attitude Flexner appreciated and shared. But Flexner still thought of himself as an out-of-work teacher.

The turning point came from an ad in an American magazine. A Danish university was advertising in the United States for someone to teach mid-19th century intellectual history.

"That was my field!" Flexner says. "I mean, they wanted an American, and I was already there—on the scene!

America and in Denmark — came into my mind."

"Something just popped. I knew. 'I don't want to do that. I want to do this.'

"Until that moment, woodworking was always a hobby to me."

That moment of decision also revealed to Flexner exactly why he had been so happy working on the kibbutz.

"I felt meaningful there, as if people appreciated me. It took me six years to realize the reason I was so happy there was not Israel, but because I was doing what I like — woodworking."

"That's when I decided what I wanted to do with my life." He smiles. "I was 36."

His new career was not possible in Denmark. "It's a very structured society," Flexner explains. "For example, my wife wanted to be a potter. But in Denmark you have to go through art school to be a potter. Over there she would have had to be a lab technician. And I would have had no job security. If the owner of the shop where I worked had died or sold the shop—I probably would have been out."

His time in Denmark was not wasted, Flexner says. "I learned an attitude toward the craft. The craftsman is a respected person. The craftsman takes his craft seriously."

The Danes also have a strong respect for tradition, he says. "Woodworking is a traditional craft, and you do it in

the traditional way, unless something changes."

America's tradition of craftsmanship ("he learned it from somebody who learned it from somebody who learned it from somebody") was broken by the Depression and World War II, Flexner maintains. He thinks it is only beginning to re-emerge.

The Flexners sold their Copenhagen apartment, making a handsome profit. They used that profit to buy an older house in Norman, to begin a new remodeling project and to establish Flexner's shop, The Workbench, at 303 East Main.

Back in the United States, Flexner quickly discovered that he had de-

veloped a new attitude toward woodworking.

"When I was on the kibbutz, I wrote my parents and asked them to send me books on woodworking," he says. "They never did, and after I got back, I discovered why. There weren't any."

But when he returned from Denmark in 1976, Flexner discovered such books had since become available. A new magazine, *Fine Woodworking*, had appeared and had become a phenomenal success. Good hand woodworking tools were easy to find or order.

He sees this new interest as an outgrowth of the craft movement of the 1960s.

"During the 1970s, a lot of people began trying to build good quality furniture, but they couldn't make it financially. Only great artists succeed at that. I wasn't a great artist, so I went into restoration and repair. I was always uncomfortable with the design part, and I loved the craft."

Flexner has built furniture, but he says restoration requires more skill.

"Restoration stretches your craft. You have to be able to imitate everything ever done, and you have to be able to make it look as if it's not new. If a person can repair something, he can make anything."

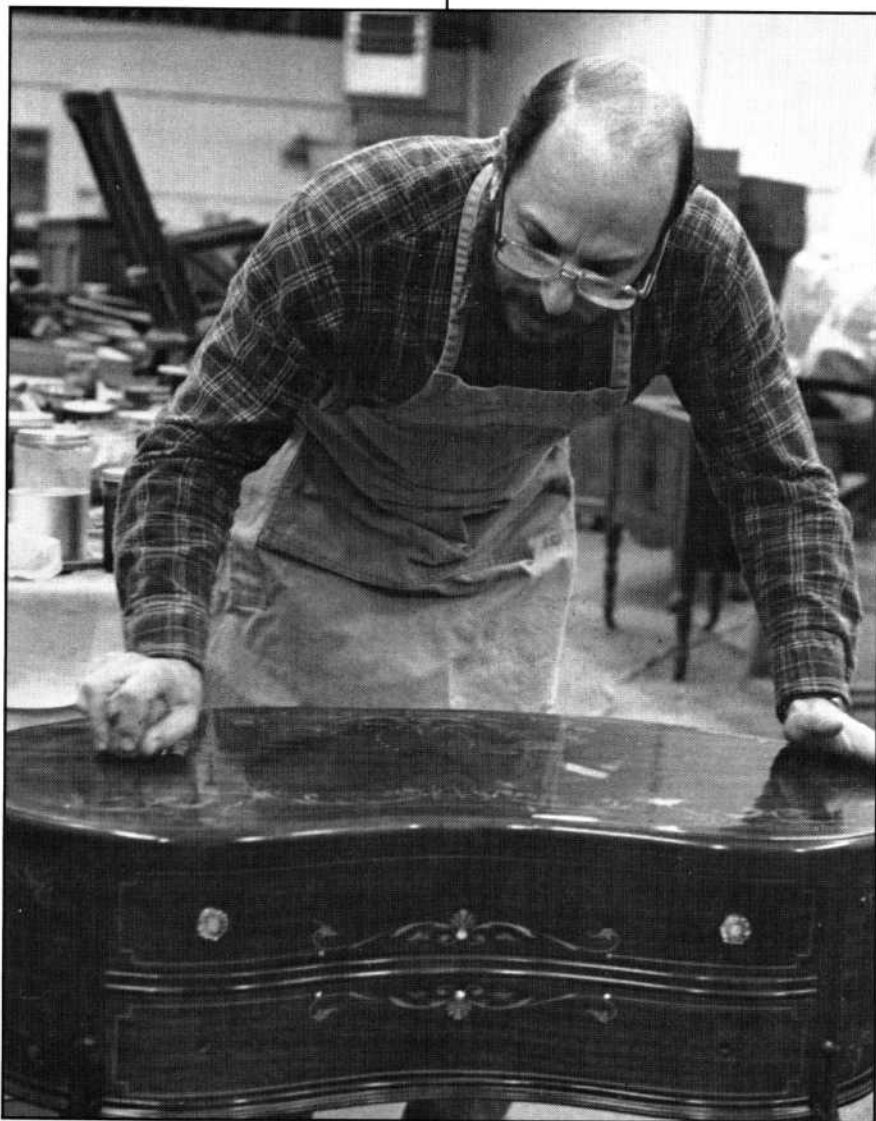
As part of the move to Norman, Birthe Flexner also attained her ambition. She became a serious artist and is one of the most successful potters in the Southwest.

As he established himself as a furniture restorer, Flexner turned to reading and research on his subject. Today he owns more than 200 books on furniture repair and restoration.

"I would read books, and I would see all around me that people didn't know the most basic things."

For example, he says, white glue had been introduced following World War II. It is a different material from the traditional glue made from animal hides, which had been used for centuries. Yet many craftsmen, even woodworking professionals, did not understand that it required different techniques.

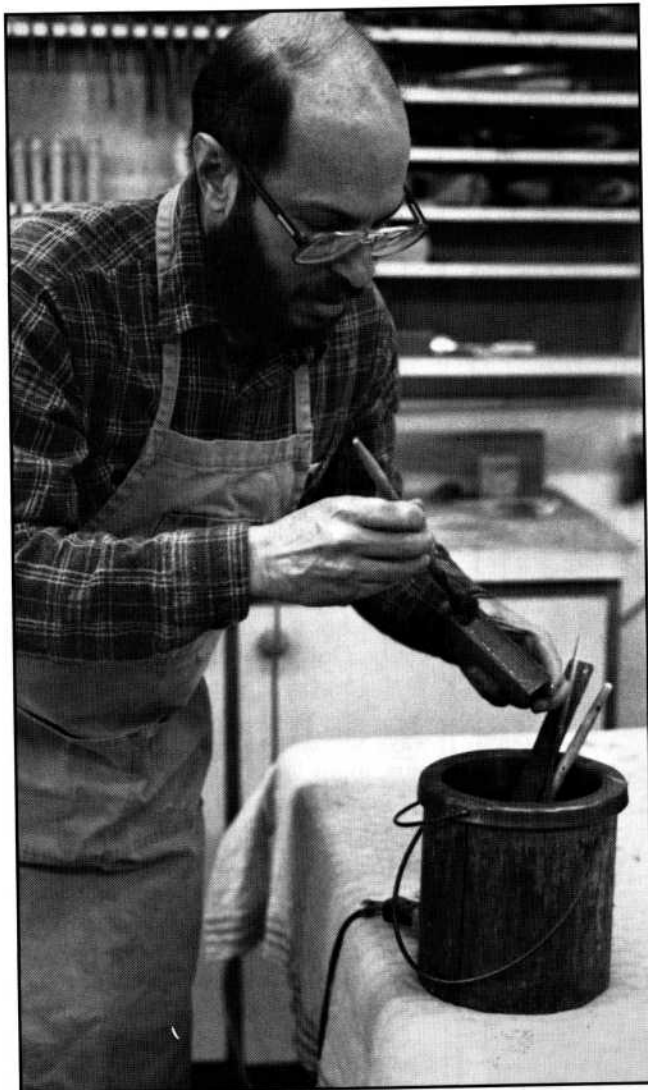
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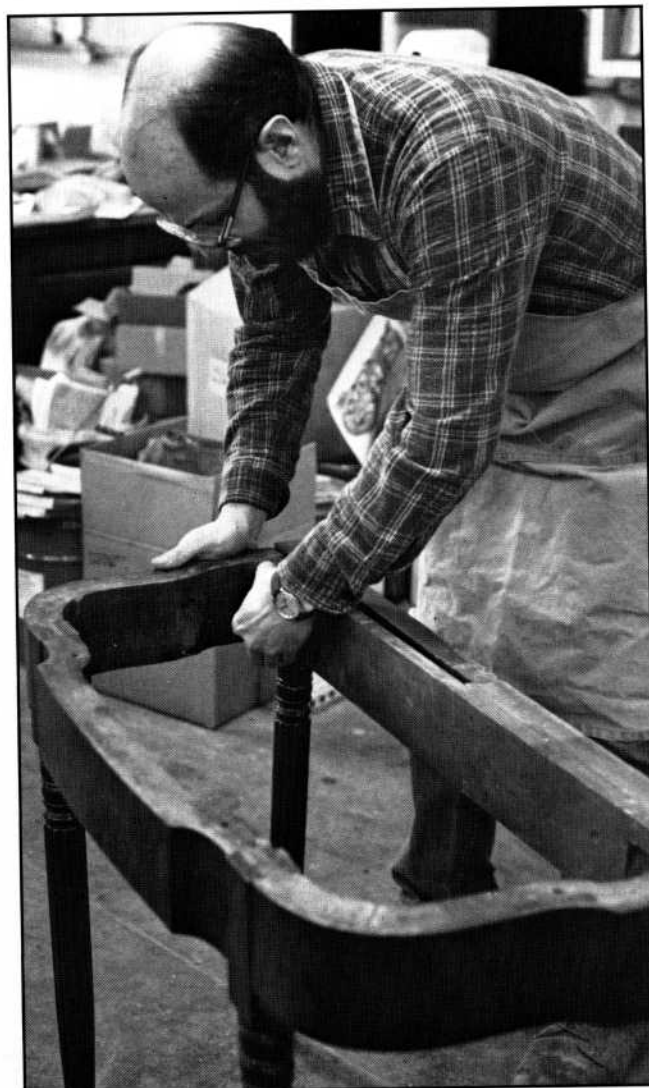
Above in his Norman woodworking shop, *The Workbench*, antique restoration expert Bob Flexner "French polishes" a two-drawer inlaid mahogany chest. A method of applying shellac to wood using a cloth pad, French polishing was considered the finest of all 19th century finishes for high-style furniture.

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*"Animal hide glue is superior to all modern glues," Bob Flexner says of the type used on all furniture made before World War II. "It is so versatile. The glue can be reactivated and restuck; it will bond to itself and will bond without clamps."*



*"Previously glued joints can be undone if needed in order to accomplish certain repairs." In the photo above left, Bob applies the hide glue to a glue block to be replaced on the 19th century mahogany card table in the photo at the right.*

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**The teacher in Flexner's background has reasserted itself. He leads workshops for hobbyists and professional woodworkers. And he is studying chemistry to be able to explain better his sometimes controversial ideas on how glues and finishes work.**

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## A Dozen Common Myths About Furniture Care

By Bob Flexner



Hide glue, Flexner explains, will bond to itself. White glue will not. This means that new hide glue can be spread over old hide glue, and the resulting repair will be sturdy. If new white glue is applied without removing all the old glue, the bond will not be as long-lasting.

"At least 90 percent of professionals never knew that," Flexner says.

The teacher in Flexner's background reasserted itself. He began leading workshops at an Oklahoma City store specializing in woodworking supplies, and he taught a series of workshops for professional woodworkers at Moore-Norman Vo-Tech School. Today he's studying chemistry so that he can explain better his sometimes controversial ideas on how glues and finishes work.

Cablevision of Norman asked him to do five 30-minute shows on furniture restoration. In a local award program his shows were named the best of the year in the educational training and instructional category.

A friend sent tapes of Flexner's shows to *Fine Woodworking* magazine. This put Flexner in touch with Rick Mastelli, who produces educational tapes for that publication. The magazine already had signed a contract to make tapes on furniture repair and refinishing, but Mastelli encouraged Flexner to market the Cablevision of Norman tapes independently.

Instead, Flexner hired a producer and made a new set of tapes. He advertised them in the mail order sections of craft and woodworking magazines. He also sent tapes to all these publications for review. The tapes got rave notices, but sales were disappointing. He sold approximately 150 tapes on refinishing and about 75 on repairing. Flexner decided to write off the whole experience.

Then *Fine Woodworking's* Mastelli called back. The magazine's deal with its restoration and repair craftsman had fallen through, and he was looking for a new woodworking expert.

"I was so excited I was shivering," Flexner recalls. "We talked for two hours. They were looking for somebody

1. *The natural oils in wood need to be replaced.* Not true. There are no natural oils in any wood except for a few exotics such as teak and rosewood. And even the oils in these woods do not need replacing. The purpose of the finish is to keep liquids such as oil, perspiration, water, etc., out of the wood.

2. *Lemon oil has something to do with lemons.* Not true. So-called "lemon" oil is thinned mineral oil with a lemon scent. Almost all of it evaporates within days after being applied.

3. *Some furniture polishes can damage a finish.* Not true. The solvents used in polishes do not react in any way with any common furniture finishes.

4. *Aerosol furniture polishes contain wax.* Not true. Wax would gum up the nozzle. If the surface of your furniture is smeary after many applications of one of these polishes, it is most likely due to silicone in the polish. (Silicone makes the surface look shiny and is difficult to remove.)

5. *Paste wax and silicone polishes soften finishes.* Not true. Neither wax nor silicone have any effect on the finish itself. A finish that becomes soft or tacky is one that has been poorly or cheaply formulated or incorrectly applied. Extended exposure to moisture or high humidity also may soften an old and partially deteriorated finish.

6. *Wax builds up.* Not true. Every time you apply a new coat of wax, the solvents in it dissolve the old wax making one new mixture. The excess then is wiped off after it hazes, leaving only that wax which is stuck to the surface. Hundreds of coats of wax properly buffed out leaves the

same thickness of wax as one coat.

7. *Wax prevents a finish from breathing.* Not true. A finish does not breathe. Once a finish is cured, the only thing oxygen does is cause a slow deterioration of the finish. It would be nice if wax prevented or slowed this; unfortunately, it does not.

8. *Wax tends to darken over the years.* Not true. Finishes darken as they deteriorate, and dirt and grime cause the surface to appear darker. Wax does not darken.

9. *Wax should be removed now and then.* Not true. Wax need never be removed. No one advocated the removal of wax from antique 18th and 19th century furniture until manufacturers introduced liquid and aerosol polishes 30-40 years ago and wanted people to switch to their products.

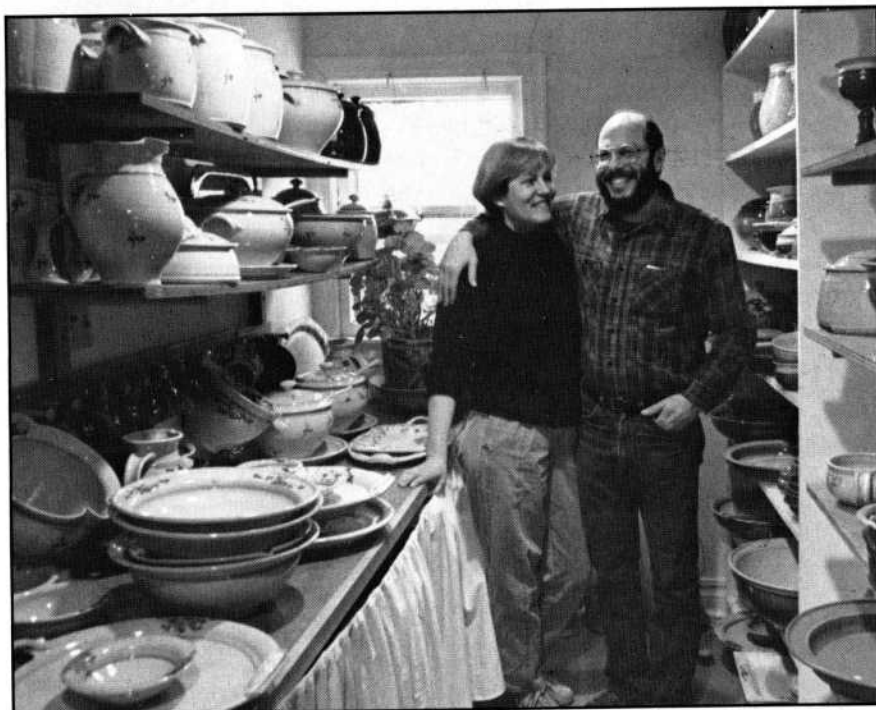
10. *Furniture should be waxed often.* Not true. There is no need to add wax to a surface until a shine can no longer be buffed up with a cotton cloth.

11. *Paste wax and liquid or aerosol furniture polishes can be applied to furniture interchangeably.* Not true. Paste wax can be applied over the various types of furniture polish, but if the liquid or aerosol polishes are applied over wax, the solvents in them will streak the wax initially and eventually remove it.

12. *Furniture polishes, waxes, "creams," etc., protect and preserve a finish.* Only partially true. A cured finish deteriorates due to exposure to air and light. No wax, liquid or aerosol polish blocks this exposure. Nor do these products react in any way with the finish itself to keep it flexible or glossy longer. In other words, *there is no such thing as "feeding" a finish.* What waxes and polishes do is repel liquids and create a low friction surface that scratches less easily (blows tend to skid off instead of dig in). Beyond this, the only thing waxes and polishes do is make the furniture look better by putting a film of oil, silicone or wax on top.

*Conclusion:* It really does not make much difference what you do or do not put on your furniture as long as you like the way it looks.

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*Achieving their ambitions would have been impossible for the Flexners in her native Denmark. One of the Southwest's most successful potters, Birthe (at work in the top photo, below with Bob in her studio) would have been a lab technician.*



to span the gap between the small shop or the hobbyist and the museum.”

The *Fine Woodworking* crew came to Norman and, working in Flexner's shop, made the tape on furniture repair in May 1987. The tape was selected as “Best Craft Video” for 1987 by the American Video Conference. A second tape, on refinishing, won that same award for 1988.

Video tape is the teaching medium of the future, Flexner maintains. The tapes have given him an unmatched opportunity to broadcast the ideas he gained through working in European and European-style shops, through reading and research, through practical experience and through his respect for tradition.

“The best furniture ever made was made in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. You shouldn't ever change what they did—unless you've got a reason.”

And as for the tapes, well— “It's a chance to reform my whole craft,” Flexner says.

Flexner wrote the scripts for both videos, and he is lavish with praise for the *Fine Woodworking* production crew. “They made me better than I am,” he says.

Flexner also believes his two previous tries at taping shows on woodworking were a major reason for the videos' success.

“It all worked together, step by step,” he says. “The experience with the earlier tapes was invaluable.”

Since 1960 Flexner has lived in Oklahoma, Washington, Israel and Denmark and been a scholar, naval officer, political activist, carpenter, teacher and, now, craftsman.

Perhaps those experiences, like his prize video tapes, “all worked together, step by step.”