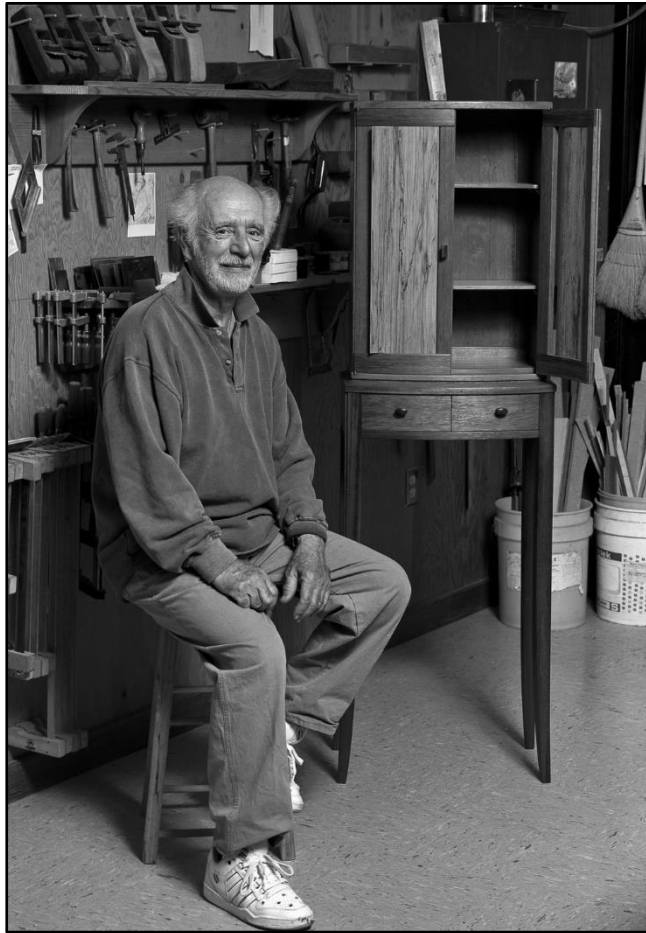


Kresimir Stefko

James Krenov

Woodworker and Studio Furnituremaker



Word Count: 1823

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Cover page image: [James Krenov at Inside Passage School of Fine Cabinetmaking workshop.](#)

1.0 Introduction

The understanding eye sees the maker's fingerprints. They are evident in every detail ... Leave Fingerprints.

James Krenov

James Krenov is considered as one of the leading woodworking writers, teachers and designers of the 20th century. He was regarded as an adept cabinetmaker, but to call him a cabinetmaker is oversimplification and not conclusive at slightest. His approach to cabinetmaking was above all romantic, impractical and based on a genuine simplicity (Gaffney, 2020). Krenov's style of cabinetmaking was more of an artistic expression where dominating mediums were wood and tools (Image 1). He was not a prolific maker, and very rarely produced more than one piece of the same furniture (Krenov, 1976). His true devotion and tenacity to this philosophical approach to cabinetmaking made him an exceptional cabinetmaker. It also made him very poor for the significant part of his furniture making life (Fitzgerald, 2004).



Image 1 [American Spalted Maple Cabinet](#) by James Krenov.

2.0 History

James (Dmitri) Krenov was born in 1920 in the Far East of Russia (The Krenov School, 2015). As a child he often moved around with his parents, not only within Russia, but around Europe, China and the USA. He kept moving as an adult as well, though he spent a significant time in Sweden, and he finally settled in the USA (Krenov, 1976). His first furniture making steps were made in Sweden where he received furniture making training in the school run by famous furniture maker and designer of the time Carl Malmsten. Carl Malmsten is regarded as a father of Scandinavian contemporary furniture design (Hevesi, 2009). Although Krenov enjoyed working with the wood and he excelled as a student, he found the training limiting and creatively restraining (Krenov, 1976). He strongly believed that the wood should decide what it wanted to be (Krenov, 1979). One should not decide to build a table and then just pick up some wood from the storage and force that timber into the object that is not meant to be (Krenov, 1977). Krenov sometimes kept the piece of timber in the storage for a decade before he could *see and hear* what the timber wanted to be (Krenov, 1976).

Krenov had no specific timber preference. He did favour colourful pieces of timber but at the same time he believed that the majority of timbers can be used in furniture making. One just has to carefully observe the hidden object within the material awaiting to be released by craftsman and their tools. He observed unique features of each piece of timber, its colour, shape, woodgrain and any other unique feature before it would be possible to *compose* (term used by Krenov instead of *design*) a new piece of furniture (Krenov, 1977). In his designs, Krenov often used curves and preferred fluid surfaces. He was very interested in boatmaking and this interest and indeed fascination with boats transpired into his furniture designs (Image 2, on the next page) (Krenov, 1979). He was also heavily influenced by *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* book by David Pye (Fine woodworking, 2010).

Although selling furniture was a challenging affair, Krenov's cabinetmaking abilities and uniqueness were recognised early on by private customers. One of his pieces was even commissioned by the King Gustav VI of Sweden. The real shift in broader awareness of his work came through Craig McArt who met Krenov in Stockholm in 1966. At this stage Krenov wrote a short essay *Wood: The Friendly Mystery*. This piece of writing was presented to Craft

Horizons magazine by McArt in the USA and soon after it was published. Shortly after publishing, Krenov received numerous letters of praise from its readers and after a while he was presented with the offer to write a book on his experiences as a cabinetmaker (Krenov, 1976). Finally in 1976 he published his first book titled *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook*. Four more books followed: *The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking* in 1977, *The Impractical Cabinetmaker* in 1979, *James Krenov: Worker in Wood* in 1981, and *With Wakened Hands* in 2000.



Image 2 [Ash Carved Curves Cabinet](#) by James Krenov.

All his published work proved Krenov not only talented and methodical cabinetmaker but skilful *wordmaker* as well (Gaffney, 2020). His early writing has drawn attention to his work and resulted in his first teaching positions, most notably at Malmsten School in Stockholm and Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. Soon after he was invited to establish a furniture making programme at the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg, California. He taught furniture making at Redwoods for 20 years and today the school bears his name; The Krenov School (Gaffney, 2020).

James Krenov was the first non-British recipient of the Annual Award of the Society of Designer-Craftsman's Centennial Medal, which was awarded to him in 1992. He became a member of the College of Fellows of the American Craft Council in 2000 and he was a recipient of Furniture Society's Award of Distinction in 2001 (The Krenov School, 2009).

James Krenov's work is represented in a number of museums in Sweden, Norway, Japan and most notably in Smithsonian, USA (James Krenov, 2009).

One of his interesting pieces of furniture is a Silver Chest made of chestnut body with pearwood drawers (Image 3). The chest can be removed from its stand and the drawer can be placed between shallow grooves atop the chest, where it rests without touching the top surface itself. The chest is oiled outside only. The rest is untreated. The size of the chest is 74 cm in height, 47 cm in width and 38 cm in depth (Krenov, 1976).



Image 3 [Silver Chest](#) by James Krenov.

Another interesting piece Krenov made is a Clock No. 2 (Image 4). The clock measures hours and seconds only with no minute hand. The body was made of tulipwood with hands of ebony. Stand and connecting yoke were made of verroola. The back of the case can be opened to provide access to the mechanism. The height of the stand is 175 cm and the clock face is about 22 cm diameter (Krenov, 1976).



Image 4 [Clock No. 2](#) by James Krenov.

In addition to his furniture making, James Krenov made a great deal of his own hand tools. Some of the custom tools he made were used

for a specific task on a single piece of furniture and very rarely, if at all, on any other subsequent piece of furniture (Krenov, 1976). He however, made almost all of his hand planes that he used extensively on all of his projects. Often, he compared the action of planing as something beautiful - a woodworker's sound of a violin (Krenov, 1976). Despite heavy use of hand tools, Krenov was not opposed to machines in the workshop. However, he suggested

that the machines should be used in timber preparation only. No machine should leave the last mark on any furniture piece. The most used machine in his workshop was the Band Saw (Krenov, 1979).

James Krenov, a woodworker poet that considered himself an amateur furniture maker, a woodworking *hippie* and a sculptor that listened to the wood and its aspirations of what it wants to become died in 2009 at the age of 88 in California. Love for wood was part of him, and when he died, he died with a piece of sandalwood in his hand that he shaped and polished with his pocket knife (Hevesi, 2009).

3.0 Opinion

James Krenov produced some very interesting furniture pieces. Utilisation of timber features were central to all his furniture. He strongly believed that the timber; a material in its own right, should speak on its own (Krenov, 1977). He emphasised the simplified aesthetic of the furniture over its function. This is not to say that the function was completely ignored. The function was an essential part of a furniture piece; it was not the central part of a furniture piece (Image 5) (Krenov, 1976). The focus of all Krenov's pieces of furniture was on the unique characteristics of the timber used in furniture composing. Often, he would not apply a finish to a



Image 5 [Oak Cabinet in a Stand](#) by James Krenov.

completed piece as he believed that the wood would get spoiled by a finish (Krenov, 1979). When he did choose to apply a finish, he would often use wax.

Krenov often criticised furniture design movements of his time which prioritised what he claimed was a constant re-invention of furniture design. He considered that a simplified design built to a perfection is more [intrinsically] valuable as compared to overdesigned, reinvented pieces of furniture. This whole approach had stemmed from an idea that timber is the main feature of any piece of furniture. A design is just a tool that allows this timber to be brought to life in a functional way (Krenov, 1976). He often claimed that he worked with the material, as opposed to on a material (Hevesi, 2009).

4.0 Summary

James Krenov is without doubt an influential furniture designer and educator of the 20th century. His designs were copied, altered and incorporated into subsequent designs of many furniture designers to this day. His approach to furniture making was an artistic rather than trade approach.

There are many features of his furniture that are appealing and worthy of adoption. His leave fingerprints approach is certainly inviting and many furniture makers will leave a mark on perfectly executed joinery. One of such marks is a gauge line around dovetails. He believed that such marks and inconsistency in crafting make the piece a human centred piece; they provide an obvious sign that it is made by a person. The marks are always purposely placed, and well balanced. They are not woodworking mistakes described as fingerprints.

But beyond this woodworking skills demonstration, the main star if you will, the focus of all his woodworking expression was timber itself. He claimed that the timber can be looked at in two ways, the first way is to consider the wood as a material, and the second way is to consider the wood as a living entity. His approach was that the wood is more than a material, more than just something we make stuff from. Wood is a living element that transforms constantly. It has a life on its own, most often spanning over hundreds of years. Woodworking

is a lifestyle; it is not just a profession. It is a very intimate thing, the relationship between the wood, tools and the woodworker.

It is hard not to see the romance of such an approach and desire to be able to possess such an attitude; to follow the path of discovery through woodworking, the childish excitement of building, woodcrafting, the sound of wood planing. Working in wood provides deep, almost meditative satisfaction.

Many will argue, such a lifestyle is a wishful desire found in Sunday newspaper supplements. But if you can dream it, you can make it so.

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Image Credits

Cover Page Image

Inside Passage School Editors. (2009). *James Krenov*. Available: <https://www.insidepassage.ca/jameskrenov>. Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.

Image 1

Lot Search Editors. (2021). *Auction Archive: Lot Number 6*. Available: <https://www.lotsearch.net/lot/james-krenov-a-cabinet-executed-in-his-own-workshop-bromma-sweden-ca-53113029#mz-expanded-view-751380148961>. Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.

Image 2

The Krenov Archives Editors. (2022). *Ash Carved Curves Reference: A (5)*. Available: [http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20\(1\)/a%20\(5\).php](http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20(1)/a%20(5).php). Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.

Image 3

Bukowskis Editors. (2021). *Silver Chest*. Available: <https://www.bukowskis.com/en/lots/1283742-james-krenov-a-casket-1960-s>. Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.

Image 4

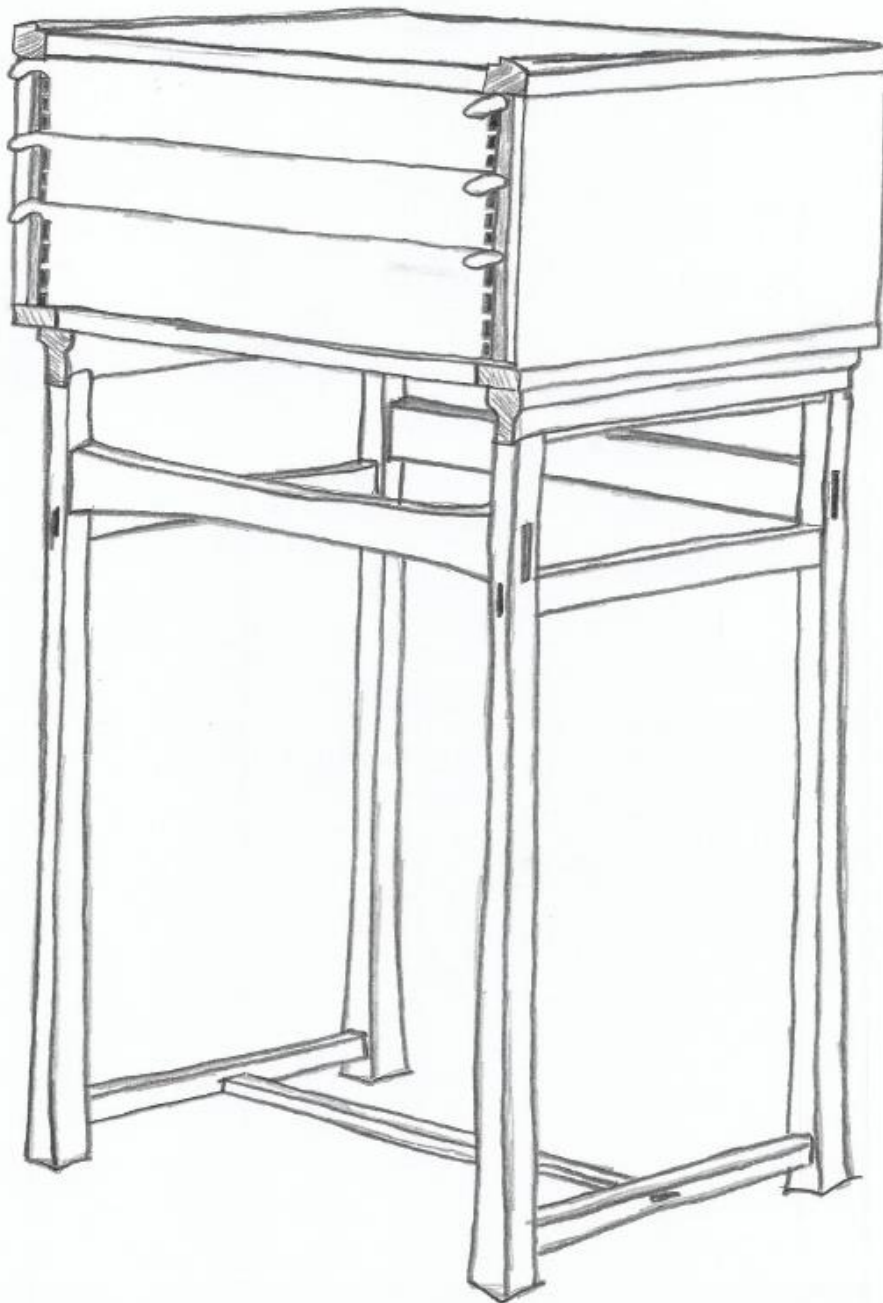
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Image 5

The Krenov Archives Editors. (2022). *Oak Cabinet In A Stand Reference: A (115)*. Available: [http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20\(1\)/a%20\(115\).php](http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20(1)/a%20(115).php). Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.

Appendix 1

Sketches attached below are part of a study prepared by Kresimir Stefko. Some of the elements of drawn furniture pieces are elements to be considered in future furniture design projects.



Sketch 1 Silver Chest by Kresimir Stefko.

Source:

Bukowskis Editors. (2021). *Silver Chest*. Available:
<https://www.bukowskis.com/en/lots/1283742-james-krenov-a-casket-1960-s>. Last accessed
4th April 2022. illus.

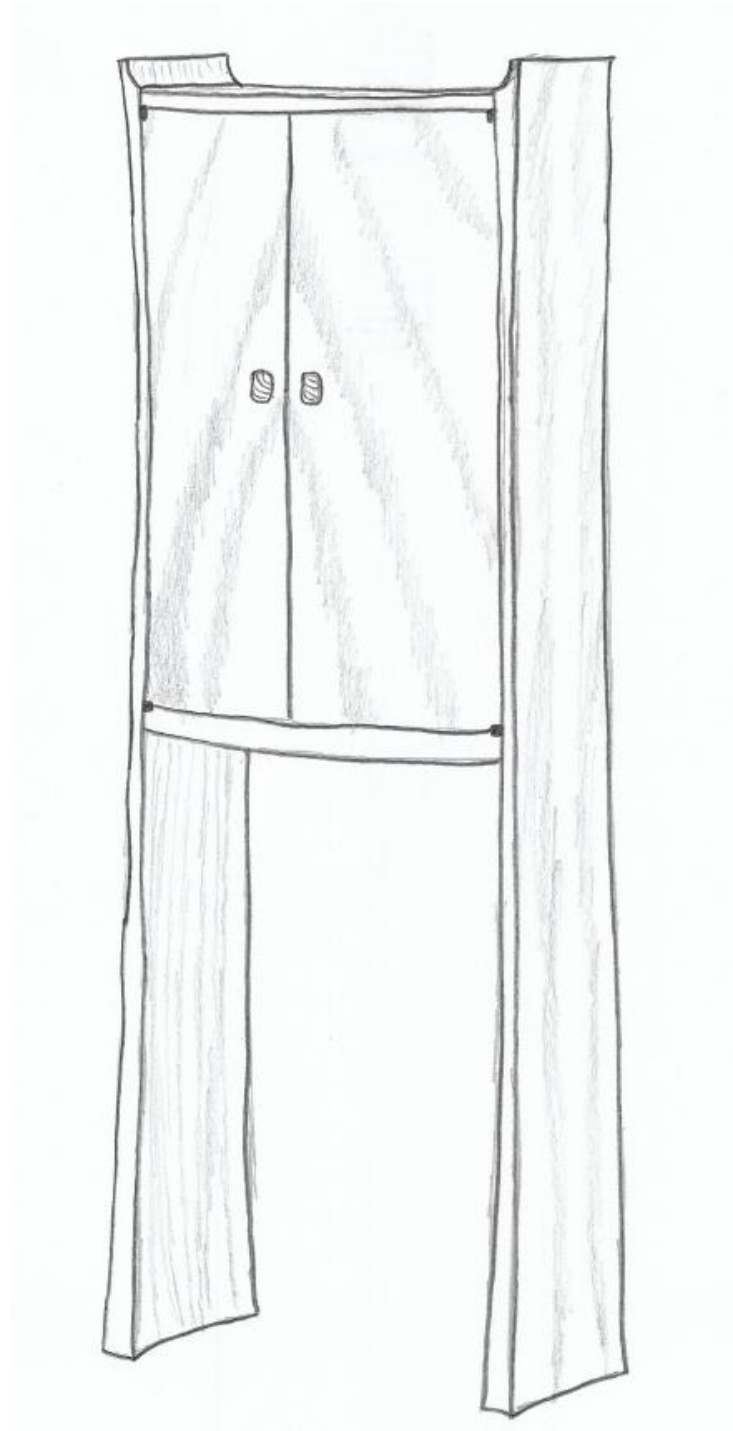


Sketch 2 Round End Table by Kresimir Stefko

Source:

The Krenov Archives Editors. (2022). *Round End Tables Reference: G (30)*. Available: [http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20\(1\)/g%20\(30\).php](http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20(1)/g%20(30).php). Last accessed 4th April 2022.

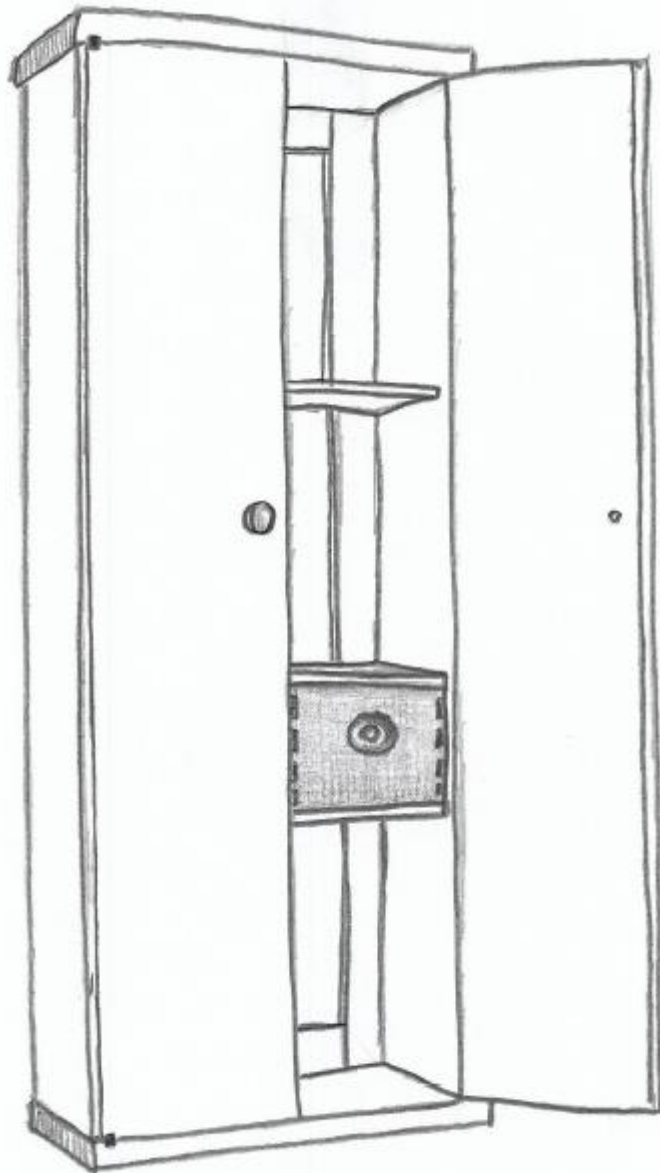
illus.



Sketch 3 Ash Carved Curves Cabinet by Kresimir Stefko

Source:

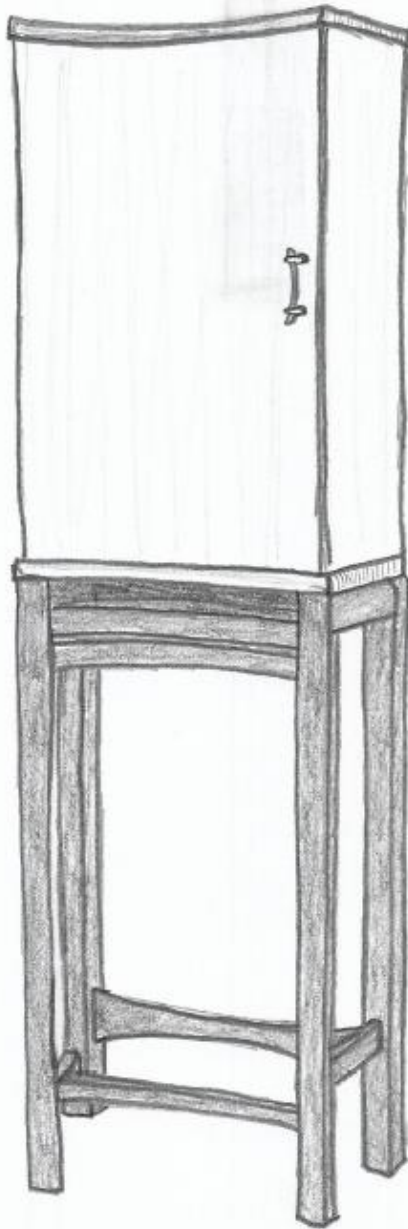
The Krenov Archives Editors. (2022). *Ash Carved Curves Reference: A (5)*. Available: [http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20\(1\)/a%20\(5\).php](http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20(1)/a%20(5).php). Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.



Sketch 4 Figured Maple Wall Cabinet by Kresimir Stefko

Source:

The Krenov Archives Editors. (2022). *Figured Maple Wall Cabinet Reference: B (135)*. Available: [http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20\(1\)/b%20\(135\).php](http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20(1)/b%20(135).php). Last accessed 4th April 2022. illus.



Sketch 5 Elm Cabinet on a Stand by Kresimir Stefko

Source:

The Krenov Archives Editors. (2022). *Elm Cabinet On A Stand Reference: A (107)*. Available: [http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20\(1\)/a%20\(107\).php](http://thekrenovarchive.org/inc-item%20(1)/a%20(107).php). Last accessed 4th April 2022.
illus.