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Above: Special-edition knives from William Henry Studio.
Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Knife Legends
by Antonio Fogarizzu and Manrico Torcoli,
Jensen Knives Krystallos, Carlton Evans Tanzania Hunter,
Knife Legends by Ron Lake and Giancarlo Pedretti.



A CUT ABOVE

Knife making is an art form appreciated by aficionados but mostly undiscovered by the masses.

BY LARRY BEAN

THERE HAS NEVER BEEN a better time than the present to be a knife collector, says Paul Shindler, who has been collecting knives for the last 30 years and operating Knife Legends, a collectible knives—or art knives—dealership in Brookline, Mass., since 2004. “People have been making knives for thousands of years, but the greatest knife makers who ever lived weren’t in the Renaissance or some other period, they’re living and working right now,” says Shindler. “No one from any previous era can touch what the best craftsmen are doing now.” It’s a phenomenon that he finds ironic, considering, he says, that knife making “is such an analog thing in a digital world.”

The craft may be at its peak, says Shindler, but the craftsmen are operating in virtual anonymity. “The Michelangelos of the craft are living and working right now, but most people don’t know art knives exist. Outside the world of knife making and knife collecting, no one has ever heard of any of these great knife makers.

It’s really a hidden world. And then when people do become aware of these knives and see what some of them cost and find out they can’t have one made for maybe 10 years, it just blows their minds.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHARBYCOOP.COM; JESSICA MARCOTTE; PAULINE EVANS; SHARBYCOOP.COM

“The target audience for our Gold Class knives includes both collectors and users alike.”

—BENCHMADE KNIFE CO.’S ROB MORRISON



Benchmade's \$1,200 Gold Class Kulgera folding knife

IN DEMAND

As with most collectibles, demand outstrips supply for the best knives. But with knives, that's easy to do, explains Shindler. “There are a couple dozen really elite makers, maybe 50 at the most, out of a thousand worldwide. You can't order knives from these guys—either because they're dead, or they've stopped taking orders, or their backlog is so long that they'll be dead before they can make your knife.”

This great imbalance between supply and demand creates rarity and drives prices as high as \$35,000 to \$50,000 or more for some knives. The most Shindler can recall anyone paying for a single knife by a living craftsman was \$55,000. “That's not bad for a pocket knife,” he says with a laugh. “You could have this knife or an E-Class Benz.”

Matt Conable, the cofounder, president, and senior designer of William Henry Studio, a 23-person operation in McMinnville, Ore., agrees that these types of knives, the ones made one at a time by hand by one-man companies, are the heart of the collectible market. “They make amazing stuff that

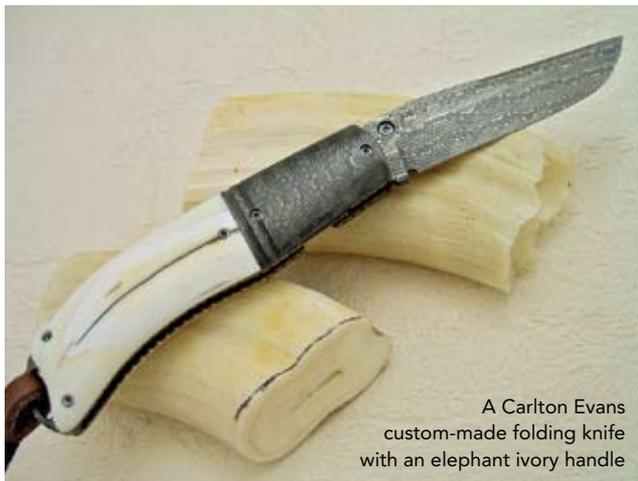
you might never think to actually use,” says Conable, who was a custom knife maker before establishing William Henry Studio. “It's like owning a Patek Philippe and not wearing it under a circumstances except to black-tie events.”

MAKERS' MARKS

In addition to showcasing the craftsman's technical proficiency, says Shindler, an elite knife also should display the maker's unique artistic vision. “If you can't tell who made a knife by looking at it, then it might not be worth collecting,” he says. “With a Picasso or a Rembrandt, you don't have to look for the name of the artist. When you look at the knife, everyone should know who made it. The best knife makers want to make a knife that doesn't look like anyone else's.” But, Shindler adds, “that's not easy to do, because people have been making knives for thousands of years.”

Conable says it wasn't his goal for William Henry knives—which are sold in luxury shops throughout the country and in Europe for as much \$2,100—to become collectible. It happened by accident, because it was impossible for the company not to make each knife different from the others. “We can't make two pieces that are the same. Because of the grain of the wood and the pattern of the Damascus steel [layered steel that displays grain patterns], every piece is unique. That adds to the knife's appeal and makes it more collectible,” he says. “It's a blessing, but it's also a curse, because sometimes you want to be able to duplicate the product. It's good that a Rolex Mariner is always a Rolex Mariner.”

John Jensen has no interest in making the knife equivalent of a Rolex. Each of his knives is intentionally one-of-a-kind. “I'm always looking for new ways to build a piece, new shapes and flairs,” says Jensen, of Jensen Knives, a one-man shop in Pasadena, Calif. He says his designs are influenced by nature. “No straight lines, lots of curves, lots of complexities, lots of colors and shapes,” says Jensen. He makes his



A Carlton Evans custom-made folding knife with an elephant ivory handle

handles from abalone, fossil ivory, or mother-of-pearl. His blades are made of Damascus steel, but the patterns in the steel are not subtle. “Others use simple Damascus patterns,” says Jensen, whose knives usually are priced from \$10,000 to \$50,000 but have exceeded \$100,000. “I use over-the-top, complex patterns that relate to nature. I’m creating an overall canvas. Mixing colors and patterns is where I thrive.”

Carlton Evans, a knife maker in Fort Davis, Texas, also tries to make each of his knives unique—and recognizable as his. “You want a style that’s different from everyone else’s,” says Evans, who spends from 40 to 70 hours on a knife’s embellishments, sometimes longer. “Collectors want to know who a knife’s maker is, like art collectors collecting the work of an artist. There are a lot of different knife makers, and if a knife is recognized as yours, as your style, that’s quite rewarding.

Evans’ signature embellishment is a lanyard adorned with beads made from the same material as the handle. He notes, however, that this feature is purposeful, not whimsical. “I don’t like clips, so I provide a sheath with each knife. And the lanyard helps you to pull the knife out of the sheath. Everything on a knife should have a purpose. There’s not much sense in adding something if it doesn’t have a purpose.”

EVERYDAY CARRY OR ART?

Evans, who makes about 60 knives a year, says he spends more time working on a knife’s embellishments than he does on its other components. “But I don’t violate the functionality of the knife,” he says. He even preserved the functionality of an 18-karat gold knife he recently made. Evan draws a comparison between embellished knives and engraved guns. “You can have two guns: one that’s engraved, and one that’s not. They might both shoot the same, but one looks better than the other.”

In 2004, Benchmade Knife Co., a high-volume manufacturer in Oregon City, Ore., added a collection of limited-edition knives, Gold Class, to its lineup. “The target audience for our Gold Class knives includes both collectors and users alike,” says Benchmade marketing director Rob Morrison. “While the production quantity is extremely limited, and the materials may be more exotic compared to our Blue or Black Class, the Gold Class knives are built to perform.” Priced from \$500 to \$1,000, the Gold Class knives are intended as EDC, everyday carry—the knife-world equivalent of an everyday driver.

If a Benchmade Gold Class is a commuting Cadillac, then Jensen’s knives are concours lawn contestants: They are meant to be displayed, not used. “I’ve kind of separated myself from the knife industry,” says Jensen, who makes only six to eight knives annually. “What I do is much different from someone who makes \$200 pocket knives. My knives can stand on their own as pieces of art, as pieces of sculpture. They’re still fully functional. You can cut or chop



Jensen Knives’ 13.5-inch Nuibiru

with it if you need to, if you want to, but I’d have to cringe if you used it to skin a deer.”

Like Evans’ knives, William Henry’s top offerings fall somewhere between objets d’art and utensils. Conable draws another parallel between collectible knives and fine watches. “A watch is really an adornment, but it appeals to us men because of its functionality,” he says. “Its functions legitimize it for us—even if we don’t know how to use half of those functions. With the knives, we’re making nontraditional products that appeal to that same sensibility.” □