

The Masters

OUR EXPERT PANEL NAMES THE TOP CUSTOM MAKERS FROM 1973-88

BLADE® enters the home stretch in observance of its 40th anniversary by doing a three-part series recognizing the top 40 custom knifemakers over those first 40 years (1973-2013). The first installment in this final series identifies the top custom knifemakers from 1973 to 1988.

We compiled a list of some of the top makers over that stretch and submitted it to a panel of seasoned knife observers and asked them to select their top five to 10—or however many they felt comfortable picking—and to rank them No. 1 up to as many as 10, with 1 being the best, 2 second best, etc.

Though “top custom knifemakers” can be subjective, we would like to think a top maker is one who excelled in terms of setting a standard that other makers attempted to emulate, and/or excelled in quality of craftsmanship, originality and creativity—or both.

We no doubt inadvertently omitted a number of makers that should be included. As a result, we asked our panel members which one or ones we had left out and to rank them in their list, too.

The panelists are: BLADE Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Fame® members B.R. Hughes and Paul Bos; Phil Lobred, long-time coordinator of the Art Knife Invitational; Dave Harvey, veteran purveyor, co-owner of Nordic Knives and co-promoter of the Solvang Custom Knife Show; and Francis Anglade, celebrated custom knife writer of Toulouse, France.

1 BOB LOVELESS

All five panelists named Bob Loveless first or in a tie for first. Lobred: “The

1: BOB LOVELESS influenced more makers than any other. (Point Seven knife photo; photo of Loveless by Weyer International)



Knifemakers’ Guild was an A.G. Russell idea but it took Bob Loveless to make it work. When his work was done there, he began to open up the Japanese market, which was the salvation of the industry in the 1980s. Loveless became the most famous American knifemaker. I believe every maker on the planet made a Loveless dropped hunter at least once.” Harvey: “He is easily the most influential and emulated maker of the past 50 years. His design influence changed the look, feel and performance of modern custom knives.”

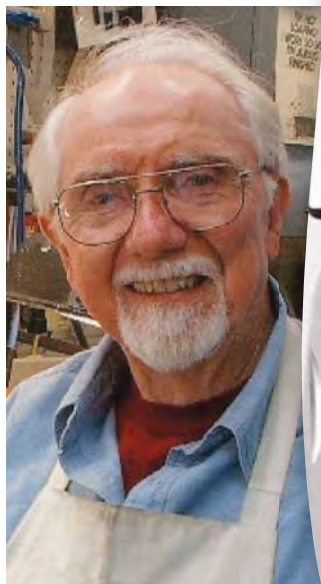
2 BILL MORAN

Lobred: “With most of the industry following Bob Loveless and new super steels being developed like 154CM and D2, forging blades was giving way quickly to stock removal. With dogged determination, Moran stuck with the forged blade and became the first to display damascus blades at the Guild Show, the most important show of this period, causing quite a sensation. Bill’s pleasant personality was also part of his appeal.” Harvey: “As much a folk artist as a knifemaker, Bill was very influential in creating and growing the American Bladesmith Society.” Hughes: “His impact is immeasurable.”

3 RON LAKE

Hughes: “Ron’s folder introduced at the 1971 Guild Show in Houston

2: **BILL MORAN** was the champion of the forged knife and modern damascus. (Point Seven knife photo; photo of Moran by Buddy Thomason)



3: **RON LAKE** patented a new lock and made a knife that was visibly pleasing and operated as smooth as glass. (Point Seven knife photo)



HONORABLE MENTIONS & OTHERS

Others garnering votes, in order of the number of votes received: Frank Centofante, Bob Lum, John Nelson Cooper, Herman Schneider, Jim Hardenbrook, Jody Samson, Lloyd Hale, Harvey McBurnette, Sid Birt and Don Fogg.

In alphabetical order, others on the ballot included: Gary Blanchard, Jack Busfield, Fred Carter, Rod Chappel, Blackie Collins, Pat Crawford, W.C. Davis, Jim Ence, Paul Fox, Don Hastings, Gil Hibben, Billy Mace Imel, Mel Pardue, Willie Rigney, Dwight Towell and Barry Wood. Please let us know who we omitted.

At least two leading makers who made knives during the period were Steve Johnson and Michael Walker. The feeling was that they made their best knives later. As a result, they and some others who also made knives in the 1973-88 period but made their best ones later will appear next time in the second installment of the series on the top makers from 1989-2000.



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4: BUSTER WARENSKI will forever be linked with his magnificent repro of the King Tut Dagger. (SharpByCoop.com knife photo)

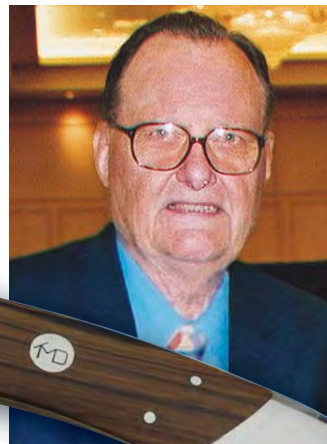


turned the world of handmade knives upside down. Few makers of the period had up to that time bothered with folders, but, almost overnight, Ron changed that." Lobred: "Lake changed the whole folder industry during this period. He patented a new lock and made a knife that was visibly pleasing and operated as smooth as glass. And if that was not enough, his knives were incredibly strong and well made. His attention to detail was the best, his fit and finish impeccable. If you collected folders, you had to have a Ron Lake." Harvey: "Ron's knives may be the world standard for quality. Unbelievable fit and finish combined with straight-forward, functional design."

4 BUSTER WARENSKI

Lobred: "Buster could make anything and did. He was so talented he made knives other makers could only dream of making. During this period he made his two most famous gold 'Legacy' knives, the King Tut Dagger and the Gem of the Orient. The King Tut Dagger was so difficult that no one has duplicated it again to this day." Harvey: "Buster had it all: the finest fit and finish you could buy, along with an artistic flare that resulted in a great legacy of beautiful art knives."

5: TED DOWELL's integrals caught on with many makers and are widely seen today at any major knife show. (Weyer International knife photo)



5 TED DOWELL

Lobred: "When Ted Dowell made his first integral California knife, it opened up a whole new facet to the art knife genre." Hughes: "His integral-hilt construction caught on with many makers and is widely seen today at any major knife show." Anglade: "I think it was in this period that he promoted his full or half integrals, his Funny Folder, and his great lightweight hunting or utility knives." Bos: "His knives were flawless and beautiful."

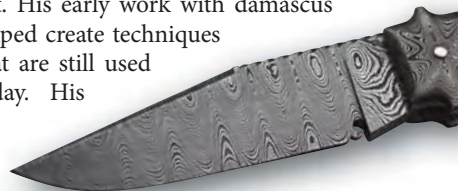
6 D.E. HENRY

Hughes: "The crispness of his work spurred knifemakers into going that extra mile and striving for near perfection."

Lobred: "D.E. Henry put bowie knives on the map."

7 JIM SCHMIDT

Lobred: "Jim was the epitome of sole authorship. Collectors loved both the man and his knives. He was a gentle giant. His early work with damascus helped create techniques that are still used today. His





6: D.E. HENRY put bowie knives on the map.



8: W.W. "BUD" CRONK made knives no one else could, as his "Camelot" (right) attests. (Point Seven knife photo)

ladder-pattern damascus was and is as good as it gets. His designs were new and novel, especially his carved gargoyle pieces. He became almost an overnight sensation and his work claims record prices today. He was one of the most popular makers of the day and he still retains that popularity." Harvey: "A wonderfully talented craftsman who also possessed a rare artistic gift. Jim set a new standard for damascus steel, and built as fine a folding knife as you could ever desire, backed up by the many collectors today who dream about someday owning one of his rare blades."

8 W.W. "BUD" CRONK

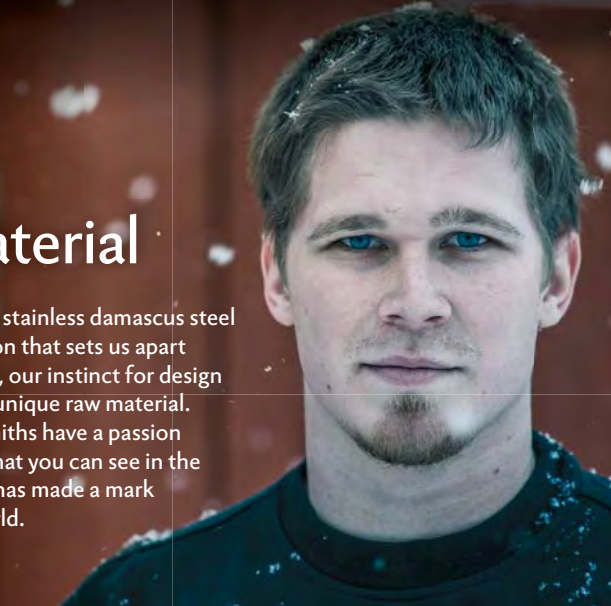
Harvey: "Years, maybe even decades ahead of his time, Bud Cronk executed some of the most challenging designs ever produced. His fantastic fantasy knives have never been topped, and don't look for them to be anytime soon."



7: JIM SCHMIDT's early work with damascus helped create techniques that are still used today. (Dave Ellis knife photo)

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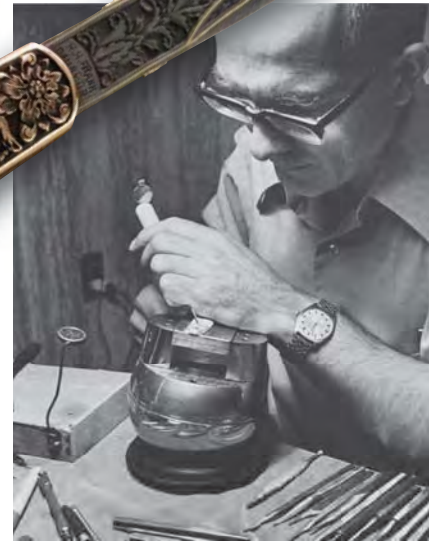
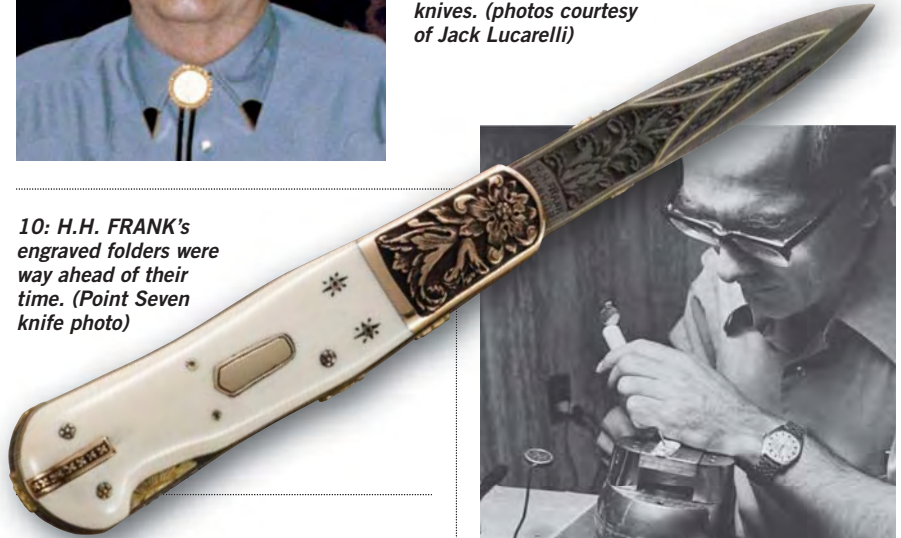
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KNIFE HISTORY |



9: **JIMMY LILE** exposed custom knifemaking to more people than ever before with his Rambo knives. (photos courtesy of Jack Lucarelli)

10: **H.H. FRANK's** engraved folders were way ahead of their time. (Point Seven knife photo)



11: **JESS HORN's** knives were in demand so much that he was the first maker to have a knife lottery at the Guild Show. (Spindel/Barrett-Smythe photo)



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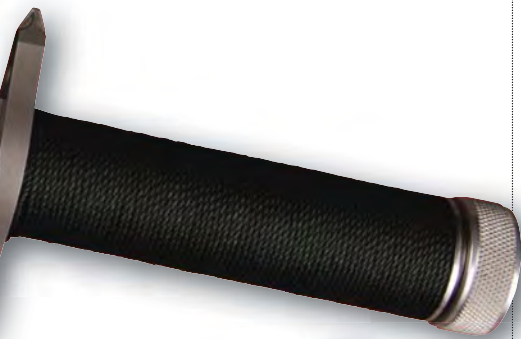
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**12 (tie): GEORGE HER-
RON** not only made great
knives but also influenced
about as many makers as any-
one. (Jay Mealing knife photo)

Lobred: "Bud Cronk made
unbelievable knives."

9 JIMMY LILE

Bos: "Along with John
Nelson Cooper and Jody Sam-
son, Jimmy Lile was one of the
makers who put knives on the sil-
ver screen in the 1960s through the
'80s and brought custom knifemak-
ing to the general public." Hughes:
"This genial Irishman was the ambassa-
dor of knifemaking, and his Rambo knife
had great impact on the buying public
following the release of Sylvester Stal-
one's Rambo movies."

10 H.H. FRANK

Hughes: "Henry Frank's im-
pressive folders, mostly with extensive en-
graving, were unique in his day." To many,
Frank's fancy engraved folders may or may
not stand out all that much now, but they
were far ahead of their time in the 1970s.

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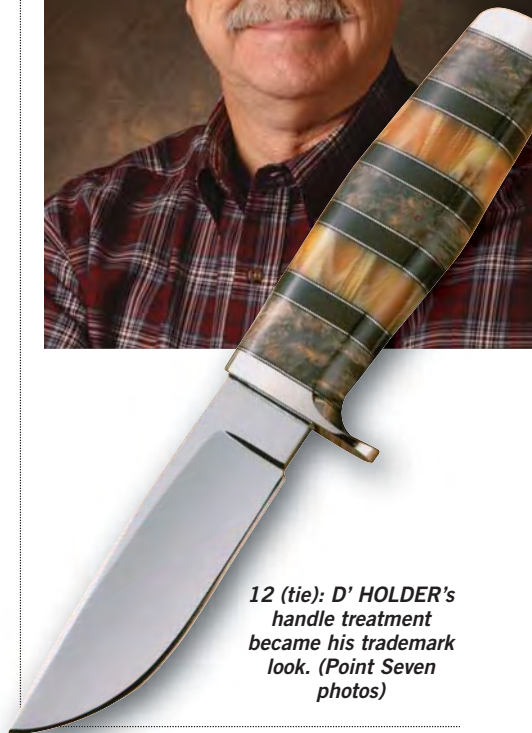
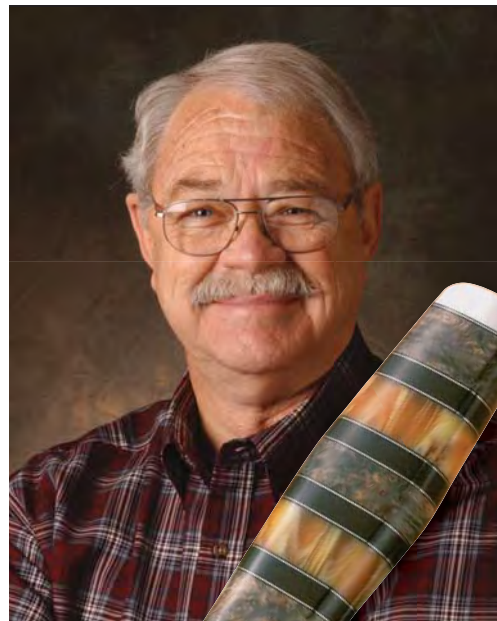
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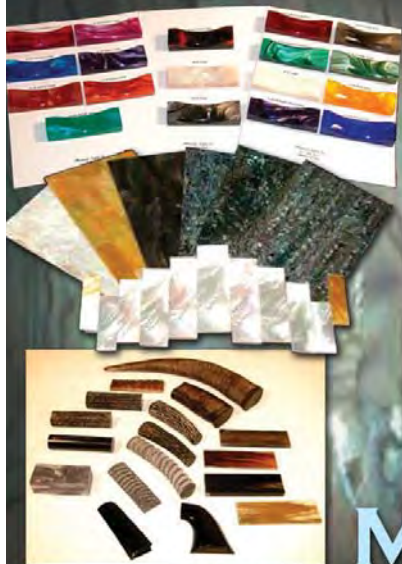
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KNIFE HISTORY |



12 (tie): D' HOLDER's handle treatment became his trademark look. (Point Seven photos)

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11 JESS HORN

Harvey: "Jess Horn is another great craftsman with an equal talent and feel for proper form and function in a folding knife. His clean designs are as popular today as they were 30-plus years ago." Lobred: "Jess Horn was the first maker to be so popular he had to have a [lottery] for his knives at the Guild Show.

12 (tie) GEORGE HERRON

Hughes: "Very slick, functional hunters were the knives most made by this personable South Carolinian, who encouraged so many to become knifemakers. A true gentleman, and a credit to knifemaking."

12 (tie) D' HOLDER

Bos: "D' made and still makes beautiful knives. I think he has taught more of today's great knifemakers than anybody. He never turned anyone away from his door that really wanted to learn. Also, he is one of if not the most prolific



14: STEVE HOEL builds some of the most-pleasing-to-the-eye folders on earth. (Point Seven knife photo)



of knifemakers.”

14 STEVE HOEL

Harvey: “Although his work is revered worldwide, I’ve always thought that Steve Hoel is an underrated knifemaker, deserving placement amongst the very top tier of makers. A master at design, he builds some of the most-pleasing-to-the-eye pocketknives on earth. If you are ever lucky enough to come across one of his fancier and rare fixed-blade art knives, you’ll see his talent goes far beyond folders, also.”

Of the makers on the list, Frank, Hoel, Holder, Horn and Lake continue to make knives today. The others are deceased.

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*Spring Hammer-In Damascus	April 26-27 May 5-9	Crowell, Potier Mike Williams
Handles & Guards Intro to Bladesmithing (2 week course)	May 12-16 Sept. 8-12 Sept. 15-19	Brion Tomberlin Greg Neely (week 1) Joe Keeslar (week 2)
*Fall Hammer-In Damascus	Sept. 13-14 Sept. 22-26	Keeslar & Neely Steve Dunn
Handles & Guards	Sept. 29-Oct. 3	Lin Rhea

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