BEST CUSTOM KNIVES
OF BLADE’S FIRST 40 YEARS
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This collection of articles mark the 40th anniversary of BLADE, and to celebrate we present the first chapter of a three-part series on the top 40 custom knives in the magazine’s history.

Part one covers the years 1973-88. We contacted a number of seasoned custom knife authorities who experienced and observed all or important parts of the time in question. The ones who answered our query are French knife writer Francis Anglade; Blade Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Fame members Paul Bos and B.R. Hughes; Roger Combs, co-editor of several editions of The Gun Digest Book of Knives; Dave Harvey, co-owner of Nordic Knives retail knife store and co-producer of the biennial Solvang Custom Knife Show in Solvang, California; award-winning knife collector Paul Lansingh; and knife collector Phil Lobred, who also coordinates the biennial Art Knife Invitational in San Diego, California.

We sent them a list of top knives and asked them to select and rank five or 10 models from it. We also asked them to add any to the list that we may have omitted. By “top custom knife” is meant one that excelled in terms of setting a standard that other makers attempted to emulate, and also excelled in quality of craftsmanship, originality and creativity.
Bob Loveless dropped hunter

Hughes had the Loveless dropped hunter and Bill Moran’s damascus knife (see following) in a tie for first. “Bob’s tapered-tang, delicately ground dropped hunter revolutionized almost overnight what custom hunting knives looked like in America,”
Hughes observed. “Very shortly, every stock removal maker in America worth his belt sander was turning out his/her version of the Loveless hunter. Moran revolutionized bladesmithing; Loveless revolutionized stock removal knifemaking.”

Bill Moran damascus knife

Any of the damascus knives Moran introduced at the 1973 Knifemakers’ Guild Show probably qualifies, though Lansingh indicated the damascus quillon dagger was the most significant one. “Moran left an industry in his wake with his damascus and commitment to the forged blade,” Lobred noted. Likewise,
Anglade saluted Moran “for the rebirth of damascus in the USA.” Added Harvey, “Bill brought damascus blades into vogue, fostering another important segment of the custom knife market, which again carried right over to the manufacturers.”

**Ted Dowell integral cap-and-hilt hunter**

“Ted put the integral on the map with this superbly designed hunter, opening the door for others to design integral knives—a very strong and handsome way to make a knife,” Lobred stated. Hughes: “Ted’s integral-hilt hunter was another innovation that was quickly picked up by other knifemakers. Today, it is a common feature on custom knives, but Ted introduced this feature and popularized it.”
Ron Lake interframe tab-lock folder

“Prior to Ron’s unveiling of his integral-frame hunter at the 1971 Guild Show in Houston, I had only seen a very few handmade folders, and very few custom knifemakers seemed interested in making them,” Hughes recalled. “But almost overnight, custom makers over the land were offering folders—and very good folders at that. The profusion of folders at any of today’s knife shows is a tribute to Ron Lake—period and exclamation mark!”
Michael Walker LinerLock

“Another most copied design, including virtually every knife manufacturer,” Harvey noted. “It set a new standard for one-hand operation and smooth action.” Chimed in Lobred, “Walker took the folder to a new dimension and was copied by the entire
industry, both handmade and factory.” It’s also the only knife on our list with a trademarked name.

Buster Warenski King Tut Dagger

“I believe the King Tut Dagger by Buster Warenski is the greatest art knife made to date,” observed Lobred, who commissioned the piece. “It’s so complex that it has not even been attempted by anyone else. It proved what could be achieved if [the knifemaker was] good enough.” Harvey: “It established a new world standard for the art of knifemaking.”
D.E. Henry English bowie

“Henry’s near flawless bowies set a new standard for exemplary workmanship,” Hughes opined. “He spurred on others to match his craftsmanship. Many tried, to the overall betterment of knifemaking, though few succeeded.” According to Lobred, “Henry showed the world fine metal work, fit and finish, and fine sheath work.”
Jimmy Lile “First Blood” Rambo knife

Harvey: “It set the knife world on fire with incredible interest in survival knives.” Lobred: “Lile put ‘movie knives’ on the map.” Added Bos, “That was the start of the modern fantasy and movie knives, though John Nelson Cooper and Jody Samson made some fine movie knives before that—but that’s another story.”
Jim Schmidt goblin folder. Lansingh

“Some others followed his lead in making goblin folders, but Schmidt owns the genre!” Lobred: “Jim proved makers could put a little piece of their soul in every knife they made. He was a rare individual.” Bos: “I think to this day that the Goblin Folder is the most beautiful knife I have ever seen.”
Bob Lum tanto

“Though other makers said they brought the tanto design to this country, I think it was Bob Lum,” Bos began. “I never saw this type of grind on a blade till Bob sent one to me for heat treating back in the ’70s. And a while after Bob Engnath started using that grind.” Added Anglade, “Bob’s first tantos were superb and they created history.”
Henry Frank fancy engraved folder

“His engraved folders were at the top of the heap in 1974,” Lansingh recalled. “He inspired several custom makers to learn engraving—for example, Fred Carter and Buster Warenski—so they could produce sole-authorship, engraved custom art knives.” Lobred: “Frank paved the way for superbly engraved folders and
Bob Loveless Big Bear sub-hilt fighter

“If you privilege the design side and its numerous followers, Bob Loveless should be there for not only the dropped hunter and Big Bear sub-hilt fighter, but also for his boot knife and chute knife,” Anglade opined. “But four Loveless knives in [such a] list is probably not a good idea.” Added Bos, “[The Big Bear] is another Loveless design that has been used by many makers.”
George Herron hunting/utility knife

Any of Mr. Herron’s top-of-the-line hunting/utility models qualifies, though we picked the late Joe Mangiaracina’s favorite, the Little Dude, to picture with this story. Anglade summed it up in a few words: Herron made “the most perfect using knives.”
Chapter 2

Best Custom Knives 1989-2000

The last chapter on the top 40 custom knives of BLADE’s first 40 years, we covered the years 1973-88. This time we pinpoint the top customs from 1989-2000.

We contacted several seasoned custom knife authorities who experienced and observed all or important parts of the time in question. The ones who answered our query are purveyor Dave Hodge of Miami Nice Knife; knife retailer/purveyor Dan Delavan of Plaza Cutlery knife store; long-time custom knife photographers Eric Eggly of Point Seven and Chuck Ward; purveyor Larry Brahms of Blade Art, who also coordinates the Usual Suspect Network/G4 knife show; knifemaker/BLADE field editor Kim Breed; and knife collector and bladesmith Roger Pinnock.

We sent them a list of top knives and asked them to select and rank five or 10 knives from it. We also asked them to add any to the list we may have omitted. By “top custom knife” is meant one that excelled in terms of setting a standard other makers attempt to emulate, and also excelled in quality of craftsmanship, originality and creativity.
Buster Warenksi’s Gem Of The Orient

“This knife is the top notch of the art knife world,” Breed began. “It’s a master’s master work in beauty. The Gem raised the bar of art knives threefold. Every little detail is exquisite in design and craftsmanship.” Added Ward, “My all-time favorite knife, the benchmark for art knives today. Buster refusing to duplicate the
‘King Tut’ knife was the epitome of a true artist. In my opinion, the best knifemaker to ever grind a blade, Buster set the bar very high for those following in his footsteps.”

Chris Reeve Sebenza

“The Sebenza won A.G. Russell’s Most Innovative Folder Award at the 1993 Knifemakers’ Guild Show,” Ward recalled. “Ease of maintenance, use of a bushing blade pivot, and many options for embellishments were factors in the judging.” Noted Brahms, “Bridging the gap between custom and factory produced folders with its elegantly aligned lines and machine perfect fit and finish, the ‘Sebi’ revolutionized the concept of the everyday carry knife. Equally at home in the field or in the office, the Sebenza was for many their entry into the world of custom knives.”
Steve Schwarzer mosaic damascus folder

“Steve took damascus to new levels of creativity. The introduction of complex designs into steel revolutionized the way we’ve come to know artistic steel,” Eggly opined. Added Ward, “[Schwarzer’s] years of study and experimentation with special alloy steels provided new and endless techniques for future makers. I see examples of this today not only in blades, but also in bolsters and other embellishments.”
Ernest Emerson CQC-6

“The Emerson CQC-6 helped to start the tactical folder craze. One of the most important knives that has affected what the trends
are today,” Delavan remarked. Maintained Breed, “The CQC-6 brought the chisel grind back into the limelight. The look of the blade grind combined with the handle shape started a new chapter in the tactical knife. Many of the hardest users of knives carry the CQC-6.”

Ed Halligan K.I.S.S.

“Ed’s K.I.S.S. knife shows how minimalistic an operational folding knife can be,” Breed noted. “It reduces the weight yet still remains strong. The K.I.S.S. knife is very cool to watch as it is opened and closed, as all moving parts are seen. It opened up a new class of knife.” Added Brahms, “Arguably one of the most successful designs of the period, Halligan’s K.I.S.S., one of the first mass-marketed, low-cost production knives, entered the field and quickly normalized the idea of everyday carry. As
a knifemaker-designed production piece, the K.I.S.S. became the flag bearer for future knifemaker-designers to enjoy financial success as well as notoriety. Columbia River Knife & Tool, along with Ed, made it simple and brought an entire industry with them.”

Daniel Winkler period knife with Karen Shook period
sheath

“The period-style blades that Daniel creates took interpretation of historical knives to new levels,” Eggly maintained. “His personal style adds to the historical aspects of his pieces, making them truly unique.” Meanwhile, Karen Shook’s period sheaths are the perfect complement to complete the overall knife package. “The Winkler knives and tomahawks from the 1992 movie The Last Of The Mohicans were the catalyst that created a new breed of knifemaker,” Ward added. “Some makers today are adhering to sole-authorship and doing period sheaths as well.”

Bob Terzuola ATCF

“Bob Terzuola, the true godfather of the tactical folder, developed the ATCF as an answer to the demands for a strong, tactically oriented folder that would stand up to the hard use of everyday law enforcement and military deployment,” Brahms
offered. “The overall success of the ATCF led the way for an entire movement that evolved into the tactical folder designs of today.”

Kit Carson Model 4

“The Model 4 was a benchmark for heavy-use combat folders,” Breed opined. “Kit designed and built a folder that could withstand the rigors of military use. Strong components assembled for strength made the Model 4 an icon in its field.”

Daryl Meier’s American Spirit Knife

Presented by Daryl Meier to President George H.W. Bush in 1990, the “American Spirit” knife features 13 American flags underscored with the letters “USA” forged throughout—and also
running the length of—the blade. Each flag has 50 stars in it, each of which has five points and which are arranged in five rows of six and four rows of five stars like on the standard flag. It was a landmark knife then and remains one today.

**Wolfe Loerchner art knife**

Loerchner won so many of Don Henderson’s W.W. Cronk Awards for best art knife of the Guild Show that some half-joked about changing the name of the Cronk honor to the Wolfe Loerchner Award. We chose his “Hummingbird” model to showcase his work for this story. “Wolfe’s pure sense of form shows so well with the Hummingbird,” Eggly explained, “simple in design yet it has incredible aesthetics that are amazing.”
Tony Bose slip joint

“I think Tony’s knives are an inspiration to most slip-joint folder makers today. For them, it’s like ‘Where do I rank on the Tony Bose scale?’” Ward opined. Prior to Bose, Ward continued, “custom slip-joint folders used to be OK, opened and closed, nice handle materials, some even walked and talked, but when I first opened and closed a Bose folder—wow.”
Alfred Pendray wootz knife

Most any knife made by the Wizard of Wootz, Alfred Pendray, contains a blade of Pendray’s wootz steel. If you have such a knife, you have a piece collectors covet worldwide. His work in the “rediscovery” of how wootz is made captivated the world of custom knives in the 1980s and ’90s, and he and his knives lodge among the industry’s elite to this day. Noted Hodge, “Pendray’s knives remain strong sellers worldwide.”
Jerry Fisk Sendero hunter

“Introduced in 1993, the Sendero hunter was designed first and foremost as a highly functional tool. That it achieved this goal is, however, secondary to the story of the knife itself,” Pinnock observed. “The elegant, almost delicate, lines of the knife struck a resonant chord with sportsmen and collectors alike. As a consequence, it became widely popular in both field-grade and highly embellished renditions. One need only walk the rows of the ABS section at the BLADE Show to see the broad influence of this design among forged hunting knives offered today.”
Chapter 3

Best Custom Knives 2001-2012

BLADE’s first 40 years witnessed the world’s finest custom knives, and the final chapter identifies the top ones from the years 2001-2012. The first chapter outlined the leading ones from 1973-88, and the second covered those from 1989-2000.

We polled a number of seasoned custom knife authorities who experienced and observed all or important parts of the time in question. They include custom knife purveyors Michael Donato of KnifePurveyor.com; Don Guild of Guild Knives; Neil Ostroff of True North Knives; Les Robertson of Robertson’s Custom Cutlery; Paul Shindler of Knife Legends; Dave Stark of Steel Addiction Custom Knives; and collectors Kevin Jones and Peter Gill.

We sent them a list of top knives and asked them to select and rank five or 10 knives from it. We also asked them to add any to the list we may have omitted. By “top custom knife” is meant one that excelled in terms of setting a standard other makers attempted to emulate, and also excelled in quality of craftsmanship, originality and creativity.
Phil Boguszewski Cobra

Robertson: “The Cobra with its recurve blade, handle that fits like a glove and that signature smooth opening is always a sought-after knife. Phil set the standard for all other makers wanting to
build a knife with a flipper opener.” Ostroff: “The Cobra excels for its durability as Phil’s best-selling knife.”

Van Barnett Time Machine

Donato: “The Time Machine has opened the pathway to multiple markets, including the high-end luxury and watch markets. It also brought much-needed new collectors to the
custom knife world. An article in Business World High Life magazine featured the Time Machine, as well as stories in several web-based magazines. This exposure to new markets is invaluable to sustain and promote the custom knife world.”

R.J. Martin Q36t
Robertson: “R.J. Martin won the award for Best Tactical Folder at the BLADE Show three years running, and the Q36 was the knife he submitted the first time he won. Blindfolded you can tell the knife is a Q36, from the smooth release of the blade to the detent to the bank-vault lock-up.”

Tom Mayo TNT
Stark: “Often imitated but never duplicated, the TNT has proved to be a timeless design that has set the standard for the titanium framelock. It’s a simple yet unique approach to the genre that is really set apart by its beauty and functionality. Tom’s superb fit and finish puts this piece at the top of the class.”
Arpad Bojtos Luna

Guild: “Arpad’s knives each tell a story. Luna depicts the celestial tale of a metaphorical shooting star and its passenger in Art Deco elements. No maker crafts a sheath like Arpad, and each amplifies the narrative of its knife. This is art in spades!” Donato: “Arpad Bojtos’ mastery of carving has taken custom knives to
a completely new level of artistry. His use of mixed media and complexity has truly raised the bar.”

Joe Kious Pocket Locket

Shindler: “The Pocket Locket is important because it’s the most flexible engraving platform ever offered. It includes many models and styles but offers pretty much endless possibilities
for the imagination of any collector. The Pocket Locket may be the most important ‘engravable’ knife ever conceived.” Donato: “The creation of the Pocket Locket has to be Joe Kious’ signature footprint left permanently on the custom knife world. This design has a very high ‘cool factor’ and is featured in many books, magazines and great collections worldwide.”

Rick Hinderer XM-18
Stark: “Rick has created an incredible line in tactical knives not to be duplicated. The XM series continues to be one of the
most sought-after knives on the market. It’s a durable tool used by first responders and collectors alike.” Robertson: “Without a doubt one of the most desired tactical folders in the world, Rick’s XM-18 continues to evolve and the demand seemingly has no end in sight. The size of the knife, Rick’s lockbar stabilizer, removable scales, reversible pocket clip, and flipper opener make this a perfect EDC.”

**Walter Brend Model 2**

Robertson: “Walter Brend’s signature model is without peer. The masterful recurve blade grinds combined with the exceptional ergonomics of the guard and handle make it the perfect all-around field knife. The D2 blade is easy to maintain and sharpen, which is why I carried one the world over as a former infantry officer in the 101st Airborne.”
Ken Steigerwalt Sea Breeze

Donato: “The Sea Breeze was a pivotal turning point in Ken’s knives. It won best handle design at a BLADE Show. Prior to releasing the Sea Breeze, Ken employed scalloped bolsters and simpler designs on his knives. The Sea Breeze took his knives and designs to a completely new level. Many knifemakers continue to raise the bar but Ken continues to recreate the wheel in wondrous ways.”
Kirby Lambert Inferno

Ostroff: “This is the knife that made Kirby famous. Even today, with so much having been done by him over the last 14 years, it is still one of his most requested folders. Primarily a LinerLock™ and occasionally a framelock, it has and still does fetch from as low as $500 for the basic tactical version to thousands of dollars for an all-dressed version in damascus, pearl or ivory. Many knife companies have tried to get Kirby to allow
them to license this model, but he keeps this one strictly custom to protect those who bought them early on and helped get his career going.”

Stephen Olszewski Grapes of Wrath
Donato: “When Stephen Olszewski created the Grapes of Wrath, I was unaware of any other custom knifemaker making anything like it. To this day, I have not seen another art knife with as many flowing lines, curves, carving and piercing of the steel in such a masterful way. This knife’s artistry, grace and elegance exemplify what it is to be an art knife.”

**Strider SnG**

Ostroff: “The custom versions of this venerable production knife are more popular than ever now. Both Mick Strider and Duane Dwyer make their own custom SnGs, with Mick going more fancy and dressed up and Duane always seeking out new, hot materials for the blades—Duane also mostly does them chisel ground.”
J.L. Williams Shoreline kick-stop flipper
Stark: “A marvel of simplicity, the kick-stop mechanism has really raised the bar for the tactical flipper. The short throw of the flipping action along with the hidden flipper tab once the blade is deployed is quite an accomplishment. To top it all off, J.L.’s fit and finish and carving skills are some of the best in the industry.”
Darrel Ralph Gun Hammer

Ostroff: “For 10 years now, the Gun Hammer flipper folder has been Darrel’s signature model. It is made in a variety of sizes and blade shapes, and the handle never changes—whether the tactical custom version that debuted in the $600 range to the high-end all-damascus with ivory and or pearl at over $3,000—
the basic design has not changed. Now being made in Texas by Darrel’s Hand Tech Made at under $300, this design keeps on rolling.”