

Functional Art

Architectural blacksmith Glenn Gilmore forges ahead

WRITTEN BY GREG LEMON

SOME PEOPLE CREATE ART IN A QUIET PLACE full of peace, in a space where creativity can bubble to the surface and overflows onto a page or canvas.

But not Glenn Gilmore. His art is forged in furnaces, pounded and twisted on anvils. His creation process sings the hair on his hands and forces him to wear safety glasses and earplugs. It involves heavy hammers and the sharp sound of metal on metal.

Gilmore calls himself an architectural blacksmith. His art is functional. What he creates, whether it is a set of fireplace doors or a staircase railing, has to serve a practical purpose as well as add beauty to a room. A railing keeps you from falling, he explains. A fireplace door keeps sparks and embers contained.

"It goes beyond the utilitarian functionality of the piece,"



Opposite from top: Gilmore in his studio strikes while the iron is hot • This expressive and pictorial railing was commissioned for the corporate headquarters of a major foundation in Atlanta, Ga. The design elements include squirrels, fox, birds, rabbits, a person reading a book, oak trees and flowers all individually hand forged and designed to relate to the clients' interests.

This page clockwise from right: This fireplace screen for the Two Feathers Ranch was designed to incorporate the ranch logo with unique hand forged copper feathers, forged steel arrowheads and a southwest Native American pattern for the frame • This impressive hall table aptly named, Aspen Solace, features a hand formed copper top with a raised ridge design and a steel border band of hand forged aspen leaves and branches set off by a bark texture background • The Fleur-de-lis fireplace door in this Vail Valley residence features one of the clients' two dogs formed from sheet copper using repoussé, an ancient metalsmithing technique, where many small tools and hammer blows are used to bring the image to life.



Gilmore said. "It adds to the whole interior design."

For the last 34 years Gilmore has been refining his craft as an award-winning metal artist.

His interest in working with metal began in the early 1970s when he was racing bicycles. He thought he wanted to get into building bikes and took some welding and machining classes. This led him to enroll in a horseshoeing school in 1974.

At the school, Gilmore learned about forging horseshoes and making tools. He learned to take a flat piece of steel and heat it, pound it, shape and groove it into a horseshoe. He then began thinking more about how the basic skills he was learning could be used to create art. In 1978 he went to a metal arts conference in New York.

"That was sort of my first vision of what forged metal work could be structurally and artistically," he said.

From that point Gilmore took a circuitous route in forging his craft. He worked for a time as a glass blower in Tennessee. He was a student and later taught at the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina. In 1984 he traveled to Belgium and Germany to study at the International Teaching Center for

Metal Design.

In explaining his art, Gilmore looks to the history of blacksmithing.

It is hard for people to remember just how much work blacksmiths did before the advent of modern metal machining, he explained.

In Europe, metalsmiths were specialized in guilds. There were smiths who made locks and gates, smiths who made fire-place pokers, and smiths who made anchors. In America the guild system didn't work as well.

"The blacksmith started to become a general practitioner," Gilmore said.

An American blacksmith might have forged a plow, fix a wagon wheel and mend your pots and pans, he said. When automobiles came onto the scene a lot of blacksmith shops became auto shops simply because smiths were the people in town who fixed things.

But from the beginning, art has been a part of the trade. Even in the simplest tool, aesthetics are as important as function.

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"There is an art in the execution and design," Gilmore said. "Particularly if a blacksmith is wanting to put his stamp of approval on it."

Gilmore takes this practical aspect of the trade and translates it into his art. He often forges the tools he uses in the intricate work he creates. Much of his art is forged from plain pieces of steel, rather than welded.

"My approach is forged metal work not fabricated, not welded together."

Over the years, the pieces that have generated the most attention are his fireplace doors.

"I realized the fireplace holds a great ambiance in people's minds," he said. "There's a real romance to it."

He works with each client to make his or her pieces unique.

"I like to make it part of what's going on in the house or the room so it looks like it was designed to be there," he said.

Gilmore's work can be seen in homes around the country. He has built fireplace doors decorated with a shrimp boat, complete with nets. For handles he forged shrimp tails.

One gate he shows in his portfolio is adorned with forged crabs. They appear to be walking across the mesh that makes up the front of the gate.

Though Gilmore specializes in fireplace doors, he has forged everything from tables, to mirrors, to gates.

In 2000 he moved from the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina to the Bitterroot Valley, Montana. His home and shop are located east of Corvallis.

Gilmore still has clients around the country. And he continues to teach and help pass on the tradition of blacksmithing.

"It's an obligation that I have toward those mentors and instructors I've had who have given so much to me," he said. "So part of what I try to do is pass that on. It's a work. It's a lifestyle. It's the way I live. It's the way I think. It's not just a job." **H**

Greg Lemon is a natural resources and political journalist in western Montana. He recently penned a biography on Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer titled Blue Man in a Red State: Montana's Governor Brian Schweitzer and the New Western Populism.

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