

# The American Blacksmithing Revival

By Glenn Adamson



## Lumpkin, Georgia, March 17, 1973:

A group of blacksmiths sits together, talking heatedly about the state of their trade. It has been dying a slow death for decades, ever since the replacement of horse-drawn carts by automobiles at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the displacement of hand-wrought tools and equipment by mass-produced ones. The business was wiped out in the course of a generation: many forges closed, while others were converted to garages (a process memorably captured in Buster Keaton's classic short 1922 film *The Blacksmith*). Once one of the nation's most widely practiced and economically vital crafts, by the mid twentieth century, blacksmithing had become a marginalized activity, its sights mainly fixed on the past, with little compass for creativity.

The blacksmiths in Lumpkin wanted to change all that. On that spring morning, they formed a new organization with the declared purpose of reviving ironwork as a creative discipline. The response was extraordinary. With twenty-seven founding members, the organization—named the Artist-Blacksmith Association of North America (ABANA)—soon attracted hundreds of members, then thousands. Skills were learned and shared. Touring exhibitions like *Iron: Solid Wrought / USA* (1976–77) were mounted. Books were published, as well as a special interest journal, nicely titled *The Anvil's Ring*. In 1979, an institution devoted to the discipline—the National Ornamental Metal Museum, now known more simply as the Metal Museum—opened in Memphis.

This phenomenon closely paralleled the contemporaneous renaissance of woodwork (turning and furniture-making), and the slightly earlier revival of glassblowing. Though lacking the robust gallery support network of those two fields—their work was too heavy and too costly to make it viable in that commercial context—blacksmiths enjoyed a similar sense of camaraderie and competition. They also faced similarly difficult questions about orientation. Should ABANA serve the professional artist, the avid hobbyist, traditional craft, or contemporary design? Eventually, that question became less pressing, simply because of the organization's success. Blacksmithing could thrive at the amateur level, with interest centered principally on historic techniques and forms—a tendency amplified by the Bicentennial in 1976—while simultaneously expanding at the elite level, with amateurs serving as a significant audience for professionals.

In short order, two clear leaders emerged in the discipline: Albert Paley, who was already well known for his spectacular jewelry when he got the commission of a lifetime, a set of gates for the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, which made him a nationally recognized figure; and L. Brent Kington, who led the only academic program in the field at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Both of these men cleverly adapted familiar historic tropes in their

Previous spread:

Left:

**Albert Paley**

*Fabricated Fireplace Tools*, 1996

Steel

40½ x 16 x 14in.

Metal Museum Permanent Collection,

Gift of Thornton Jordan, 2020.3.1a-d

Photo: Kim Ward

Right:

**C. Carl Jennings**

*Inverted Viking Helmet with Three Horns*, 1994

Mild steel

10 x 6¾ x 7 in.

Metal Museum Permanent Collection,

Gift of the Artist, 2003.7.8

Photo: Houston Cofield



**Dimitri Gerakaris**

*Eagle Square Gateway*, 1983

Forged and fabricated, color-galvanized steel  
across Main Street from the state capitol in Concord, NH  
27 x 40 x 6 ft.

Photo: Sherman G. Howe

© Dimitri Gerakaris

This work replaced a historic building that was fire-damaged beyond repair and serves as the entry to a new city square, punctuating a line of live trees. It was innovative in 1983 for the way it seamlessly combined forged steel plate with forged steel bars to achieve architectonic mass and to overcome the linear quality of steel bars commonly produced in twenty-foot lengths.



**Dimitri Gerakaris**

*Boylston Place Gateway*, 1988

Forged and fabricated, color-galvanized steel  
plus forged and fabricated bronze, leading  
to the Boston Theater District from Boston Common  
19 x 24 x 6 ft.

Photo: Sherman G. Howe

© Dimitri Gerakaris

Gerakaris seamlessly combines forged steel plate with forged steel bars to achieve architectonic mass and to overcome the customary linear quality of steel bars that constrained the design possibilities of preceding smiths.

work, with Paley taking inspiration from the whiplash lines of Art Nouveau, and Kington making dynamic variations on the forms of Americana— weathervanes, fireplace tools, even the hobby horse. In more recent years, the most prominent blacksmith working in the US has probably been Tom Joyce, renowned for his implementation of industrial-scale tooling and his thoughtful engagement with the materiality of iron itself, which has included an in-depth study of African metalwork. While younger than most of the other artists discussed here, Joyce also has roots in the 1970s, when he apprenticed as a teenager under the printer and blacksmith Peter Wells in El Rito, New Mexico. He started his own shop in Santa Fe in 1977, at the age of twenty-one.

There were also many other smiths in the revival generation, equally fired by the ambition to creatively develop the craft. Among them were James “Wally” Wallace, founding director of the National Ornamental Metal Museum; Alex Bealer, whose 1969 book *The Art of Blacksmithing* served as an informal bible for the field; artist-blacksmiths Dimitri Gerakaris and Robert Owings, both of whom served as editors of *The Anvil’s Ring*; the brothers Stephen and Michael Bondi, specialists in creative architectural work; and talented makers like Ivan Bailey, Thomas Bredlow, E.A. Chase, and Christopher Ray, all capable of extraordinary invention and finesse. Many of Kington’s students have also gone on to success in the field, including some from his first years of teaching blacksmithing at SIU, such as Wallace, Philip Baldwin, and Joel Schwartz.

The story of all these makers deserves to be told in full depth and detail. This article draws on interviews with Wallace, Gerakaris, and Michael Bondi. The first of two articles, it aims to make a start, by focusing on the period just prior to the revival of the ’70s and ’80s. This was when the iron was cool, the craft at its lowest ebb. If not for the persistence of a few remarkable craftsmen—figures whom Gerakaris describes as the

**L. Brent Kington**

*Dragster*, ca. early 1960s

Sterling silver

3¼ x 2¾ x 4½ in.

Metal Museum Permanent

Collection, Gift of

Michael Croft, 2016.9.1

Photo: Kim Ward



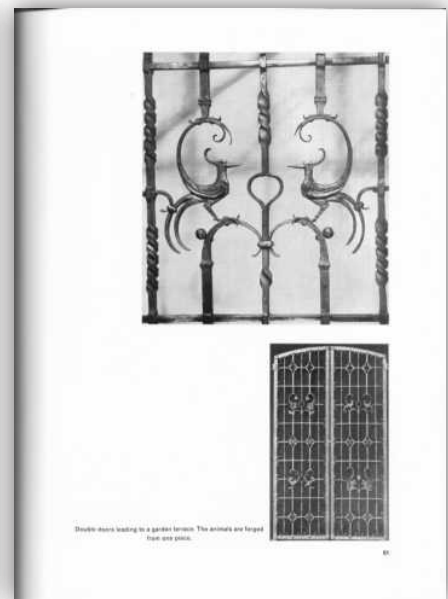
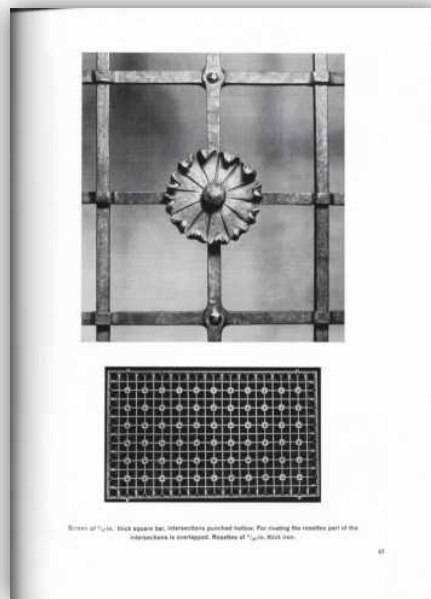
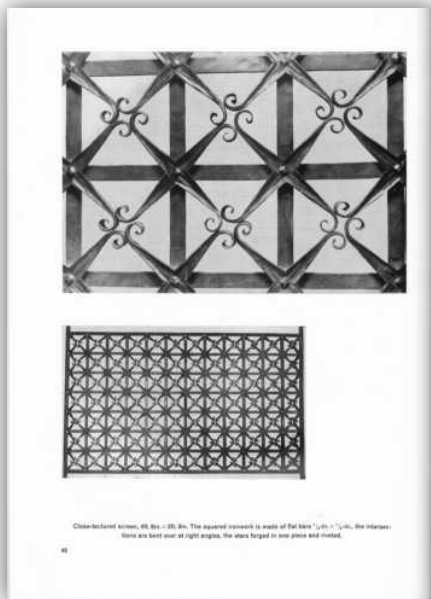
“keepers of the flame”—the 1970s generation would have faced an even greater struggle in restoring the discipline to vitality.

An emblematic example is that of James and Ben Deal, brothers who operated a grocery, junk shop, and blacksmithing forge in Murphysboro, Illinois. James had learned blacksmithing at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the vocationally oriented school for African-American students set up by Booker T. Washington. He opened his shop in 1933, teaching the craft in turn to his younger brother. The two brothers ran a thriving if eclectic business, diversifying across a huge range of jobs, making small household goods and fixing everything from lawnmowers to farm plows. A local paper captured the atmosphere of the place in 1978: “The brothers can fish around under any pile of steel and come out with what they are looking for, sometimes a finished job with the price tag scrawled in soapstone crayon.” It hardly sounds like the birthplace for an artistic renaissance, but it was here that Brent Kington—who was already well-trained in light metals—had his first lessons in ironworking, having identified the Deals as the only proficient blacksmiths working anywhere near Carbondale.

To be sure, not all aspiring smiths of the revival relied on domestic sources. Just as glassblowers looked to the island of Murano near Venice, woodworkers set their sights on Scandinavia, and potters studied the rich tradition of Japan, blacksmiths sought out training in Europe. The trade had been considerably less disrupted there, thanks to continuing interest in architectural ornament. After World War II, blacksmiths were more in demand than ever, as reconstruction projects were undertaken across the continent. Americans were well aware (and somewhat in awe) of figures such as the formidable Fritz Kühn, an East German smith who had trained under his father and went on to teach his son Achim.

Philip Simmons, an African-American blacksmith in Charleston, South Carolina, was initially trained by a formerly enslaved artisan. That was not uncommon, as both free and enslaved Blacks were widely involved in architectural crafts such as masonry and carpentry—the South was quite literally built by their hands.

Kühn’s work was widely known through his own books—he published no fewer than twelve in his lifetime—and exhibitions like *Towards a New Iron Age*, which originated at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and toured the US in 1983. His shop was behind the Iron Curtain, so it was not possible to study there, but a few adventurous Americans did travel to Europe to study with other masters: the Bondis apprenticed at the studio of Simone Benetton in Treviso, Italy; Ivan Bailey studied for a year with Fritz Ulrich in Aachen. In 1974, for the first official ABANA conference, Ulrich came to demonstrate, making him the first of many European masters to come and impart his knowledge. Ulrich did not speak English, but Gerakaris, who had spent time in Freiburg, Germany, on a foreign study program, was able to serve as his translator, and included insights he gained from the experience in



Metal Museum Library Collection, Fritz Kühn, *Wrought Iron*, 3rd Edition. (Huntingdon, PA: Blue Moon Press, 2010), 41, 47, 61. Images of *Close-textured Screen*, *Screen*, and *Double Doors*, from his book *Wrought Iron*. Photos courtesy of the Metal Museum.



**Simon Benetton**  
*Punto d'Incontro*, 1984  
 Steel  
 53 x 24 x 28 in.  
 Metal Museum Permanent Collection,  
 ABANA Collection, 2016.1.284  
 Photo: Kim Ward

*The Anvil's Ring*. He saw German makers like Ulrich and Kühn, as well as the Benettons in Italy, as “the main exponents of a modern idiom in forged iron.”

In America, meanwhile, historic metalwork was a mainstay for the few blacksmiths who still swung a hammer. The two great luminaries of Arts and Crafts ironwork, Philadelphia’s Samuel Yellin and Milwaukee’s Cyril Colnik, had both been immigrants from Europe who specialized in that arena. Yellin’s shop, still operational though at a much-reduced level in comparison to its glory days as a shop with 200 artisans at work, was one place that a young blacksmith could get to grips with hammer and anvil; Christopher Ray and Fred Crist were among those who spent time there, as well as Peter Renzetti and Dimitri Gerakaris. In the 1920s and 1930s, Kenneth J. Lynch was the leading blacksmith in the New York area, conducting repairs on the Statue of Liberty and creating metalwork for many Manhattan buildings, including a set of Art Deco doors for the Chrysler Building.

The Colonial Revival of this time also created opportunities. Philip Simmons, an African-American blacksmith in Charleston,

South Carolina, was initially trained by a formerly enslaved artisan. That was not uncommon, as both free and enslaved Blacks were widely involved in architectural crafts such as masonry and carpentry—the South was quite literally built by their hands. Simmons was one of only a handful of African-American blacksmiths to continue working in architectural ornament full-time, however. He took over his mentor’s shop in 1933, in the depths of the Depression. It was only the sudden enthusiasm for historic preservation, animated by the Colonial Revival, that created a market for his work.

Up in Virginia, meanwhile, the enormous undertaking of the preservation and construction of Colonial Williamsburg meant work for men like Daniel Boone VI, who won the contract for restoring and replacing the town’s historic metalwork in 1937. He was succeeded by John Allgood (who was present at the early ABANA meetings), and also trained another smith, Bea Hensley, who grew up next to Boone’s shop in Burnsville, North Carolina. Hensley remembered watching from the door when he was only four years old; he would eventually take over the shop when Boone

**Samuel Yellin**

*Andirons*, ca. 1920  
Wrought iron, brass  
16½ x 12 x 21 in. (each)  
Metal Museum Permanent Collection,  
Gift of Clare Yellin, 1992.6.3a-b  
Photo: Kim Ward

**Michael Bondi**

*Rosette*, 1989  
Bronze  
2¾ x ¾ in.  
Metal Museum Permanent Collection,  
10th Anniversary Gates Rosette  
Collection, 2014.2.212  
Photo: Kim Ward



retired. While the famous craft school in nearby Penland did not have a forge, Hensley's shop became a regular pilgrimage destination for aspiring young smiths.

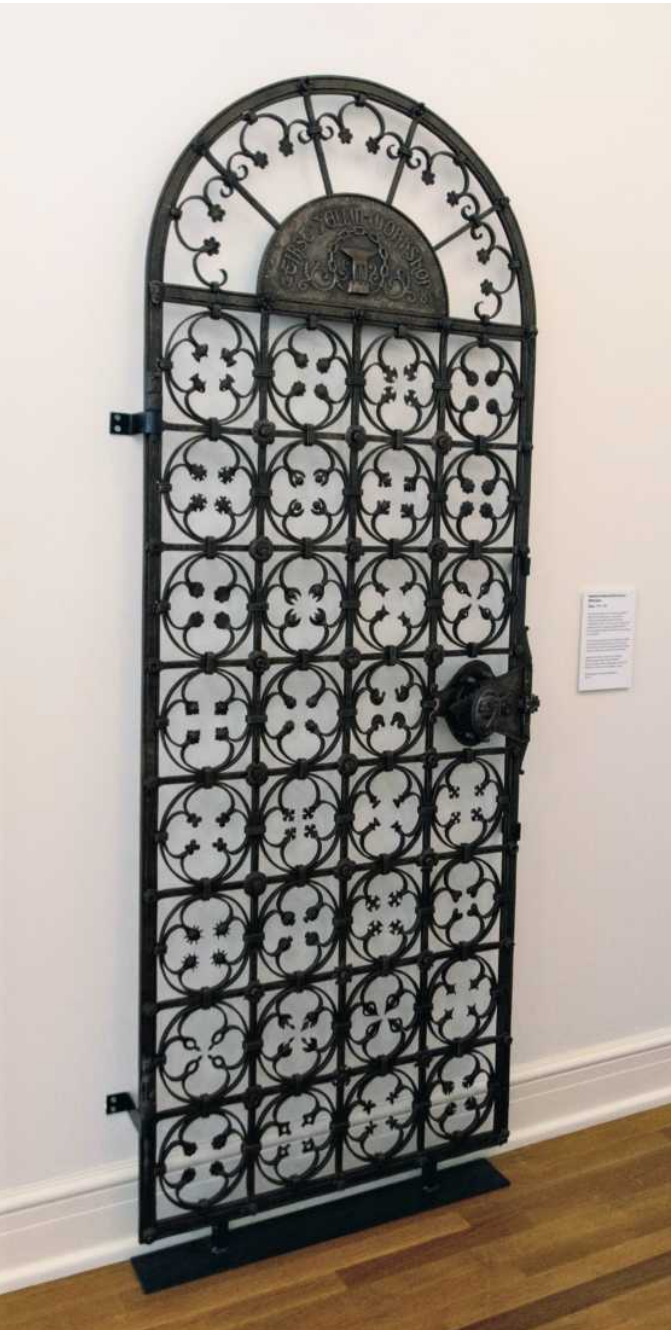
As these stories imply, the overall orientation of midcentury blacksmithing was conservative; skills were preserved along with the material fabric of the past, providing little impetus for innovation. The more artistically inclined smiths of the 1970s—men like Paley, Kington, Gerakaris, and the Bondis—sometimes formed strong bonds with older smiths. A good example is Donald Streeter, a leader in historic preservation based in New Jersey, whose 1980 book *Professional Blacksmithing* supplemented Bealer's earlier text as a key resource. Yet in other cases, they found themselves at odds with the generation that preceded them. A particularly reactionary, though memorable, figure was Francis Whitaker, who had some basic training in Yellin's Philadelphia shop, then went on a two-year apprenticeship with a blacksmith in Berlin. After returning to the US, he set up shop in Carmel, California, and subsequently in Aspen, Colorado. Whitaker was apparently a real curmudgeon, with little inherent interest in fostering the next generation of talent; Wallace says, "If he didn't want to talk to you, he'd just start up an arc welder, and conversation became impossible."<sup>1</sup> Yet he was also an effective teacher for basic techniques, and when he did begin coming to ABANA conferences in 1976, he proved an important source of knowledge and skill for less experienced makers.

Among the midcentury blacksmiths, one stands out as a particular innovator: C. Carl Jennings, whom Bondi calls "the godfather of creative smithing in America." His uniquely artistic approach to the medium was

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**Phillip Baldwin**  
*Window Grille Study*, 1978  
 Mild steel  
 21½ x 26 x 3 in.  
 Metal Museum Permanent Collection,  
 Gift of Nancy Baldwin, 2010.2.2  
 Photo: Kim Ward

**Various Artists**  
**led by Francis Whitaker**  
*Door*, 1983–84  
 Steel  
 86 x 33 x 4 in.  
 Metal Museum Permanent Collection,  
 Gift of Clare Yellin, 2018.2.1  
 Photo: Kim Ward



the result of his exposure to several different influences early in his career. Born and raised in Illinois, his father and grandfather were both practicing blacksmiths. In the 1920s, he went to study applied art at the California College of Arts and Crafts, and worked in a welding shop in Alameda, getting additional training from another European immigrant craftsman, a John Forester (or Foster), who had come from Hungary. Jennings's skill set further expanded during World War II, when he worked as a welder in the booming Naval shipyards.

After the war, Jennings established himself as a metalworker of extraordinary skill and vision, creating both functional and purely sculptural work in copper and iron. His masterpiece was his own home in Sonoma County, designed and built in collaboration with his wife Elizabeth (whom he met at CCAC), beginning in 1969. The round stone structure is festooned with his metalwork, from wrought iron lighting to a fantastical fireplace in *repoussé* copper. It bears strong comparison to other crafted homes in California, such as that of J.B. Blunk in Inverness. Nothing in it is standardized—it is a monument to intense individualism. (A short documentary film on the house, including interview material with Jennings, can be seen on the Metal Museum website.)

Jennings did help younger craftspeople in the 1970s, teaching occasionally at the College of the Redwoods, and serving as the first vice president of the California Blacksmith Association. But the most important lesson that he and the other blacksmiths of his generation offered was beyond technique. By maintaining their practices at a time when the trade was thoroughly becalmed, the Deals, Simmons, Hensley, Whitaker and Jennings showed that it was indeed still possible to be a working blacksmith in America. From that foundation, a whole discipline reinvented itself.

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1 Author interview with James Wallace, conducted December 29, 2020.