





Rewards

Forged Art

When sculptors put fire to metal, beautiful custom fixtures take shape. *By Gregory Taggart*

THE SCENE RESEMBLED a grade-school field trip to the Virginia countryside. As the owners of Tiger Valley Estate looked on with anticipation, artist blacksmith Nol Putnam, X-Acto knife in hand, busily reshaped cardboard leaves the size of tall children, then tacked them

Photographs by Thibault Jeanson



REWARDS

to a wooden frame traversing the country road in which they were standing. Stepping back from this makeshift wood-and-cardboard gate, Putnam solicited the owner's opinion: "How's that?" As the owner shook his head, Putnam repositioned the cardboard leaves. "And now?"

Putnam, a gifted blacksmith from The Plains, Virginia, almost always creates a 3-D prototype of big projects so that the client can better visualize what Putnam easily sees in his head. This time he was seeing a country gate based on *The Dream*, a famous painting by Henri Rousseau. "I was trying to play off of the name Tiger Valley," Putnam says, "and remembered his painting of those wonderfully huge sort of primitive leaves with these tigers peering from and around the foliage." Putnam even went so far as to design the gate's steel frame to mirror the mountains on the horizon.

Welcome to the world of custom-made fixtures and architectural ironwork, where artisans and dollars meet to create beauty and ambiance. Putnam is one of the best, but he's not alone among blacksmiths and sculptors who have taken their age-old skills and artistic gifts into the mountain homes and the downtown brownstones of America's wealthy. What results is a happy marriage of dependable function and one-of-a-kind artistry—an answer to Duke Ellington's famous warning that "Beauty without utility is futility."

Peter Fillerup's work is hardly futile. Fillerup, from Heber City, Utah, divides his time between sculpting the bucking broncos and feisty jaybirds that adorn universities' grassy malls and designing dioramic chandeliers and fireplace screens to decorate the Aspen hideaways of Hollywood moguls. Trained as an artist, Fillerup feels he brings a "sense of design, balance, and rhythm" to a project—and a sense of humor.

His trademark bronze-and-rawhide chandeliers tested that humor early on. "It was like walking through hell and back," he laughs. Rawhide shrinks when it dries, and Peter discovered that the shrinking never seems to end. "We'd covered a chandelier in dried rawhide only to return one morning and find that it had shrunk even farther, bending the bronze.

When I walked into my studio, the chandelier suddenly went 'Wonk!' like a bike tire when you hit a chuckhole." What had been an attractive light fixture twisted into a mess of bronze and rawhide.

Today, the rawhide does his bidding. "Others may have figured out how to do it," Fillerup says, "but they're not talking." Consequently, he developed his own process to stop the shrinking. Now his chandeliers, wall sconces, fireplace screens, and other fixtures grace homes and buildings from the Wyoming governor's mansion to Aspen's Maroon Creek Country Club. And his name is in the Rolodex of Robert A.M. Stern Architects, of New York, and Meg Harris Interior Planning and Design, in Denver, among others.

Fillerup speaks with pride of one of his favorite pieces, the chandelier *Blackfoot Horsethief*. Considerable research and a certain reverence went into this bronze, glass, and rawhide light fixture that hangs in a Glenwood Springs, Colorado, home that was recently auctioned by Christie's.

"We researched Blackfoot costuming, horse markings, the headdress, and even their religious beliefs before we produced the fixture," he says. "We even had a museum in Montana send us a prototype Blackfoot arrow so that the one on the chandelier would be authentic."

When Fillerup started out, he would design even the toi-

let-paper hangers for homes. He's now more selective. "It's generally not worth the money or the effort to get involved with pull knobs and carpet rods, for example, unless we're doing the whole house as a creation."

Joel Schwartz, a blacksmith from Deansboro, New York, agrees. He likens the smaller fixtures to jewelry. "They become very personal. People agonize over them, whereas they don't seem to agonize over the main architectural features, maybe because they're too overwhelming."

And where clients aren't agonizing, Schwartz's creative spirit is free to roam. That spirit is evident in the juxtaposition of an organic, lyrical stair railing descending an otherwise austere concrete staircase in a Greenwich, Connecticut, home. "Here's the room. We need to warm it up," said the client. And warm it up Schwartz did, with vinelike forged stainless steel, seemingly sprouting from the concrete steps



Lofty ideas: Some fixtures flow, like Schwartz's tendril railing (previous pages), while others soar, like Fillerup's *Blackfoot Horsethief* chandelier (at left and above)

that lead, appropriately, to an atrium. The vines curl gracefully beneath a slender but sturdy rail that glides down the stairs, curving gently at the bottom to plant itself in the last concrete step. "I needed to impose enough structure on the stair balustrade so that it didn't appear unstructured," Schwartz says.

His creativity was especially challenged by a project involving a circular concrete fishpond and an uncompromising city building code. The code required a three-foot-high protective railing around the pond with no more than four inches between each picket. "No one wanted a three-foot-tall railing, because it would look like hell," he says, smiling.

Schwartz's solution? He positioned 72 sleek, slender, black steel fish, each three feet long, radiating in a neat circular array straight from the center of the pond toward the pond's rim, like the petals of a flower. The forged steel profiles of the fish act as the railing's pickets, their heads resting on the concrete rim of the pond, their tail fins welded to two elevated steel hoops that form a large circular opening near the center of the pond. Schwartz then divided the pickets into eight hinged sections, four of which open out from the center for pond maintenance. The building inspector could only stare in disbelief. "I'll be damned," he said. "We're gonna have to change the code."

Each of these craftsmen is an artist. They create unique and functional works of art. But as different as their visions are, all three approach the business in a similar manner. For example, though they all work willingly with designers and archi-

itects, they welcome the client's participation. "Then they're not just buying something because they have the money to buy it. They become part of the process," says Putnam.

And each artisan is a creative genius, looking for new challenges and opportunities. Schwartz, for instance, feels his niche is stair railings. Even so, he has designed chandeliers, birdbaths, and even weather vanes. Fillerup just launched a furniture line, and he's considering doing neon designs. And Putnam? Well, who else but someone willing to try new

things would have thought of the Rousseau gate? And their work succeeds because they take pride in attention to detail. Fillerup once tracked down the original source of trade wool to find a particular color so that a Blackfoot Indian design in a new chair would be authentic. The source turned out to be in England. When asked why he didn't just go to a fabric store in Salt Lake City, he laughs: "It's just not the right color. It's just not right."

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the great German architect, used to say that "God hides in the details." It's the details that give life to *Blackfoot Horsethief* and the Rousseau gate. "They draw you in as you approach a well-crafted piece; and as you draw nearer, more and more detail appears," explains Nol Putnam. "In a gate I designed for the National Cathedral [in Washington, D.C.], every center is

different. Every bolt head is different. Every rivet head is different." And, he might add, every home graced with the custom work of these craftspeople is different. ■



Still life: In Virginia, Nol Putnam's forged-steel, brass, and copper gate, inspired by Henri Rousseau's painting *The Dream*, captures a mélange of falling leaves

As You Like It

Custom fixtures and other architectural elements all come with custom prices, depending on size, detail, materials, design difficulty, and your deadline. And they are not cheap. As Nol Putnam says, "I try to tell people that I'm very expensive. I'm very good. And I take my time. I don't want this work to come back to me."

Before any work is done, expect to pay a

retainer that will be applied to the total contract price. The artisan will then develop a design and return with, at a minimum, drawings and, depending on the size of the project, a 3-D prototype for your approval. Once you approve the design, plan on paying anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of the contract price to begin, with the rest due upon completion of the piece.

Here's information on how to reach the

artisans mentioned above:

◆ Peter M. Fillerup, Wild West Designs, P.O. Box 286, Heber City, UT 84032; 435-654-4151, fax 435-654-1653. ◆ Joel A. Schwartz, Schwartz's Forge & Metalworks, P.O. Box 205, 2695 Route 315, Deansboro, NY 13328; 315-841-4477, fax 315-841-4694. ◆ Nol Putnam, White Oak Forge, P.O. Box 341, The Plains, VA 20198; 540-253-5269, fax 540-253-5173.

