

ABANA President's Message

February, 2008

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

In my first couple of messages as ABANA's President, I have written a lot about ABANA and where we are now. It is important for the president and board of directors to be open and honest in our communications, and I am gratified by the responses I've gotten from you. Together, I believe that we can make ABANA the vital and vibrant organization that will serve blacksmiths and blacksmithing into the future. There will be more messages like those first ones, but I have to be honest, I haven't read a lot of President's messages myself. I open these magazines to learn about and to see blacksmithing, not to learn about ABANA, and I figure most of you are the same. So now, for something completely different... blacksmithing.

A couple of times over the past year or so, this magazine has run articles that are beginning to discuss design as a tool of our trade, and I'd like to encourage everyone to participate in that discussion and pay attention to it. Over the past 30 years as blacksmithing has returned from near-extinction to its presently revitalized state, our conversations and the content of our publications have largely been concerned with the techniques of blacksmithing. To be certain, if we are doing our jobs right, there will always be new people coming to blacksmithing, and ABANA will always be around to provide the kind of technical information that you've come to expect. But as more and more people have come to blacksmithing, more people are around who already have the basics, and we need to continue to engage them and offer services that suit their needs. As our craft advances, it is time we begin to consider not only how we make things, but what we are making. When there were very few people out there who knew blacksmithing and our supply of teachers was dwindling, it made a lot of sense to focus our efforts on preservation. Now that there are thousands of us sharing the techniques of blacksmithing and classes around the country are full, the pool of resources and skills within our community is again rising, and so it is time to broaden the discussion. Whether your interest is in historical reproductions or contemporary architectural work, traditional handworking techniques or modern hybrids of forging and fabrication, design is an essential part of the process of making whatever you make.

Techniques can be a huge influence on the design process, or they can have smaller influences. Having multiple tools in our arsenal to solve any given problem allows us some choices in how we arrive at our final product, and what it will ultimately look like. That is the best reason I can think of for stretching ourselves technically. The greater our problem-solving vocabulary, the better the chance that we can get the finished piece we're after. As we mature in our craft, our technical abilities should increasingly serve our design goals. How often have you seen a well-crafted piece that just didn't "work" for you? What is the difference between that and another

piece that does? I bet it wasn't just how it was made. Line weight, proportion, negative space – these are the variables that folks outside our craft will use, either consciously or unconsciously, to evaluate our work, alongside techniques, and they should be our concerns as well. Don't get me wrong, I want to generate an audience for blacksmithing that appreciates the skills of our trade as much as anyone, and in my own work, I am deeply engaged and interested in the processes of traditional blacksmithing. But in the end, I can't argue that what I do is better than things made using other techniques; I can only say that it is somewhat unique for relying on a set of skills that set it apart from objects made in those other ways. If I want to make a living, and more generally, if I want blacksmithing to survive into the future as a vital craft, the best thing I can do for all of us is to make beautiful objects employing the skills of the blacksmith.

We've seen the beginnings of conversations about line weight and about how we can add to the visual interest of a piece by varying the spacing between those lines. For my part, I'd like to add negative space to our discussions. In terms of the scale of architectural work, furniture-sized objects and larger pieces, one way to generate well-proportioned designs without having to work with huge sections of metal all the time is to combine and connect the lines of the steel we use so that the spaces between our forgings become the shapes we define as well as the lines themselves. You don't have to worry that this conversation is over your pay grade or outside your focus just because you aren't the greatest blacksmith ever or you haven't been to art school. These techniques have been used by blacksmiths for centuries right alongside all of the other techniques we share in our quest for beautiful, functional objects. Design is a skill like any other skill we use and should be a part of your thinking and progress from the beginning.

Negative space is nothing more than the space between the parts we make, and it is often most of the space our objects occupy, so it makes sense to think of the space between our parts and the relationship they have to each other just as much as we think of the parts we have to make. Just to get the ball rolling, think of two similarly shaped scrolls. Lay them alongside each other so that they aren't touching and see what you have. Now move them so that one is directly underneath the other and they are touching at two places. They touch at some point in their curves, and the unscrolled ends of the bar touch as well. Now you've made a space by connecting two lines, and that space is part of your design. It is that simple. Rotate one of the scrolls against the other, and see how changing the relationship between the two scrolls and the space between them affects the way you see the pieces as you change the arrangement. You can place them inside of each other concentrically with the unscrolled ends apart and you will have the silhouette of a much larger scroll. Learn to look at the spaces you are making as much as the lines you are making and your work will be that much more interesting, no matter what style you choose to work in. Besides, it is a good way to get more bang for your buck. You don't have to fill that space with forgings, you just have to use your lines to make people see that space. When you have a bunch of parts for something that you are putting together,

arrange them in different ways and use them like puzzle pieces, where no answer is wrong, just different. See how your own impression of the parts you've made changes with different arrangements. The spaces you create can be as simple or as complex as any of the techniques you use to make them, and there is no wrong way, but realize that you are making those spaces whether you choose to think about them or not, and other people will see them, too.

When I look around at other crafts which have been experiencing revivals similar to our own, one of the things I see is that while practitioners of those crafts continue to teach and learn and push the limits of their technical craft, there comes a point something like the point of fluency when learning a language. A person no longer has to devote all of his or her energies to solving the problems of how to make any given thing, and the techniques used to make an object cease to provide the subject, or content of the object. Think about woodworking during the '70s. Different colors of wood used to make the joinery into a visible detail turned the processes used into the highlights. Following that came an evolution where good craftsmanship was just as important to the finished object, but became secondary to the design. Craftsmanship as a means to an end. Technical mastery isn't required to make beautiful objects any more than we'd need a huge vocabulary to make our point eloquently when we're speaking. Our "vocabulary," the techniques of blacksmithing is always sufficient, and there is always more to learn. The trick at every stage of our learning is to use what we have to the best effect. Some of the most beautiful things I have ever seen coming from blacksmiths aren't beautiful because of their exquisite craftsmanship, though the craftsmanship is exquisite. They aren't beautiful because of the advanced techniques the smith employed to make them, though he or she may have used advanced techniques. They are beautiful because someone had an idea for a beautifully shaped thing and used the skills they had to bring that thing into the world. Each of us has that same ability.

So my challenge to all of us is this: don't just make stuff nicely, let's make nice stuff. If our goal is to make sure that blacksmithing never again sinks to the brink of extinction, the best thing we can do is show the world some beautiful blacksmithing.

Forge on!

Chris Winterstein, ABANA President