

INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL STUART

Blacksmith, Metal Sculptor at Iron Antler Forge, Damascus, Maryland

By Vince Nakovics, Tidewater Blacksmiths Guild, Virginia Beach, Virginia

Photo credit: Robert Chubin

I was in my early 20s when I first looked into blacksmithing. I had been welding and manipulating metal for several years and was looking for more control over the medium. I thought you needed a really expensive furnace to forge metal, but after meeting a farrier with a small forge on the back of his truck, along with everything else needed, I realized that this was an attainable goal for me. I then talked with Dan, Judy, and Tom Boone at a local Sugarloaf Craft Show and they told me all about blacksmithing guilds. With that information I joined the Blacksmith Guild of Central Maryland and took a few beginning classes. After that I really taught myself.

The Early Years

After much introspection, I decided to be a metal sculptor. It was always something that I wanted to do, but never really took the step. After seeing my work, co-workers would always ask me, "What are you doing working here?" implying that I should be out there making and selling my art. I guess for some of us it is easier to stay put than take a risk and step out into the unknown.

Luckily for me, my wife Lisa supported me and gave me the push to step out and start my own business.

I consider myself more of a metal sculptor than a blacksmith. When I think of a blacksmith I think of someone who does more traditional work using rivets, collars, and forge welds. While I do use these techniques, I don't mind using welding, plasma cutting, and things of that nature. I still do everything by hand, but I guess my work is more about the end result and less about how it was made. That being said, I put a lot of pride in my work being detailed, refined, and 100 percent hand made. That's not right or wrong, it's just the way I choose to do it. I have seen metal work done completely by means of a computer-guided laser and it was well done and very artistic. Not what I'm going for, but no less valid.

Much like everything else in life, metal sculpture is not black and white – how can it be, when you are talking about art, of all things? My feeling is, do what you need to do to get your



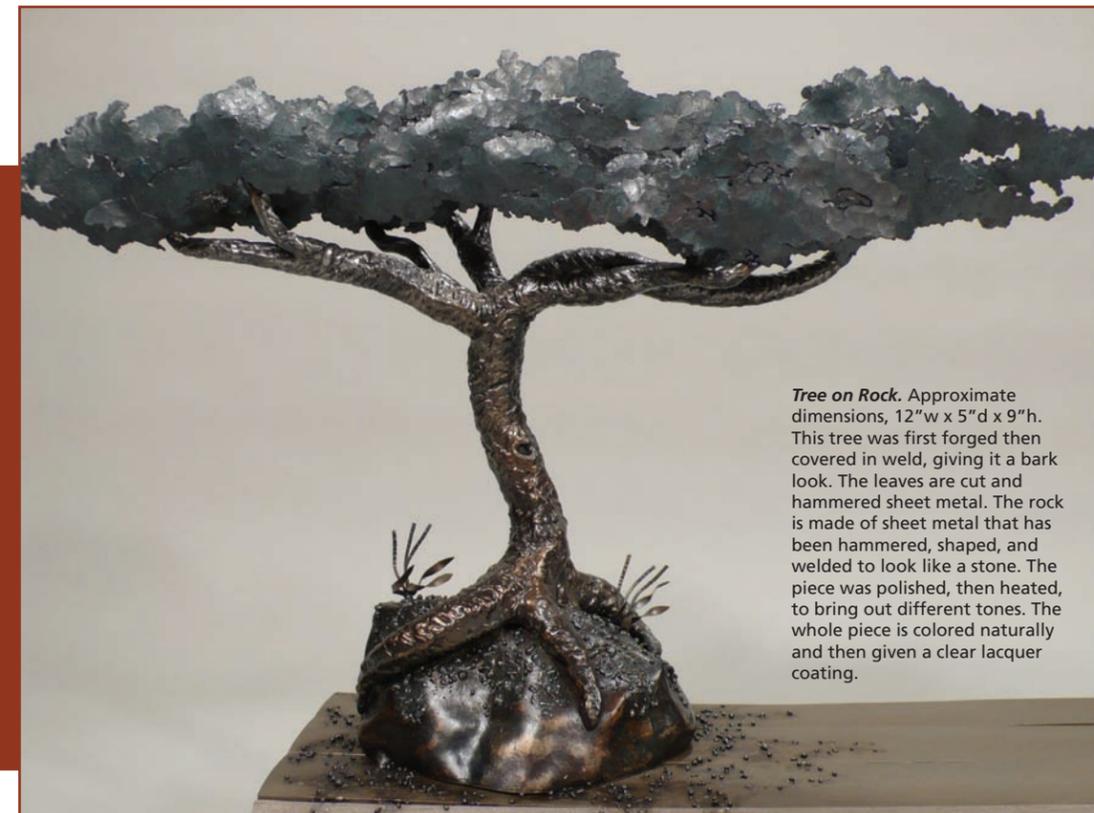
Bamboo & Sun Busting Out.
Approximate dimensions,
26" w x 4" d x 29" h. Forged
steel bamboo over hammered
sheet metal mountains. The
colors have been brought out
using heat. The background
is sheet metal that has been
given a pebble texture and then
colored using a gold rub. The
sun is hammered copper. The
entire piece has been painted
with clear lacquer.

From the author:

I selected Daniel Stuart for my interview series because I found an originality and quality of craftsmanship that was obvious from looking at his exceptional works online (www.ironantlerforge.com). I am looking for artists within the blacksmithing community who are not necessarily as well known as others, but are out there making a living at blacksmithing.

I had the opportunity to meet Dan, his wife and daughter after conducting my interview via e-mail, at Dan Boone's Pasture Party last February. I found him to be a humble, down-to-earth artist who brings a love of blacksmithing and metal sculpting. In my visit with him, he revealed several techniques of his works.

Most of his work now is from repeat customers or referrals, and, due to his business, rarely finds time anymore to participate in shows/events. Dan does a lot of combination metal sculpting and blacksmithing designs (metal with glass, metal with wood) as that is what his customers want. He does participate in the Countryside Artisans of Maryland which conducts workshop tours four times a year.



Tree on Rock. Approximate
dimensions, 12" w x 5" d x 9" h.
This tree was first forged then
covered in weld, giving it a bark
look. The leaves are cut and
hammered sheet metal. The rock
is made of sheet metal that has
been hammered, shaped, and
welded to look like a stone. The
piece was polished, then heated,
to bring out different tones. The
whole piece is colored naturally
and then given a clear lacquer
coating.

DANIEL STUART

point across. If your point is "I made this the old-fashioned way," then do that. If your point is the end result, then do what you need to do to get there. One is no more valid than the other, in my opinion. One thing I do feel strongly about is people who say, "There is only one way to do..." fill in the blank. That's a nice way of saying, "My way is the only right way and if you do it any other way then it's wrong." Unless you're in it for historical accuracy, then I say that there are a thousand ways to do any given task, so keep your mind open and new ideas and techniques will come.

About Tools

When it comes to the question of tools, I find that making new tools is just as much fun as making artwork. In my mind, the tools are art! I have several tables, cranes, lifting devices, forges, swages, etc., that I have made from scratch and a dozen other tools that I've made

by modifying older, existing tools. For example, I took an old hand-crank drill press, laid it down on its back, and with a few simple modifications, turned it into a twisting device. One end of a steel bar goes in the modified drill press while the other end goes in a vise. I heat the bar using a torch and then turn the crank on the drill press to twist the bar. Simple, hand-done, and it feels good to be able to keep the old tool working, even if it is in a new way.

In terms of the hammer I use, I have one of Brent Bailey's divided cross-pein hammers, which I believe is around three pounds, although I have never weighed it. It's kind of a modern take on a German-style hammer and works well. I think I use this one the most because, although it's a great hammer in its own right, it's also a piece of artwork that I invested a good amount of money in and would hate to see it sitting on a shelf not getting the respect it deserves. I have dozens of hammers which I use for different tasks and really love the old ones that I find at yard sales; it feels good to use them and give them new life.



Daniel, twisting a piece of 1/2" tapered steel using the modified drill press described in the article.



Martian Cabbage, Approximate dimensions, 12" w x 8" d x 15" h. This alien-looking plant is made of forged steel. The tentacles have been twisted many times for an organic look. The leaves have a hammered texture with chased veins. The colors have been brought out using heat and then a clear lacquer was applied. The ball in the middle is blown glass with titanium which gives it that amazing color. The wood was an old root that I found in the woods and the base is oak with a hammered steel sheet over it. It was also colored using heat, then lacquered.

Thoughts on Professional Blacksmithing

I think if you want to do this kind of work professionally, then investing in a good power hammer is almost a must. My anvil is a 275-lb. double horn Peddinghaus. I chose it because it's forged instead of being cast, so I know it's tough and can handle the abuse of heavy hammer blows. I also really like the double horn because I do a lot of small detail work and having a tapered flat horn really comes in handy.

If you are thinking about going full time, I can tell you that it's a rough time to be an artist. However, that being said, ask yourself: "If it weren't about the money, would I want to do this on a daily basis?" If the answer is yes, then take the next and easiest step which is go visit and talk with as many people as you can who are doing this full time. I have been around the world and everywhere I go I always take the time to look up a local metal worker and visit their shop. I have never walked away without learning something new. Start slowly and get your bearings, as there is a lot to learn. I started doing metal work part time and did not go into it full time until the orders grew to a point where I needed to quit my other job. It's nice to have another job at the beginning because it really helps take the pressure off. If you get stuck, then call on some of those friendships you made at the beginning when you were visiting other metal workers. I have found that the metalworking community is very open and willing to give advice to those who want to know. And I myself am very open and hold no secrets for those who need a hand.

I would have to say that the artist who really first inspired me was Albert Paley. Someone at one of the first blacksmithing classes that I was taking brought in one of Paley's books and I was amazed at how organic he was able to make steel look. From that I developed my own way of giving metal fluidity and dynamic life. It's my great joy to take something as hard and solid as steel and make it look like it is alive and brimming with energy. I owe that to artists like Albert Paley, who stepped out of the box and followed his passion. When you look at Paley's work you not only see a different way of using steel, but also you see an eye for detail and quality that gives validity to his vision. Your average person can easily see an inherent quality in his work, even though he or she may not particularly like the form itself. For me this speaks volumes over someone who just slaps pieces of metal together and calls it art. I have always found that when you really love what you do, it is always worthwhile to take the time to do it well. ✨

From the Deep. Approximate dimensions 22"w x 22"d x 45"h. This table was made using steel tubing with forged legs that look like rope. It has the feel of something at the bottom of the ocean that is being held down with the ropes. The brackets that the ropes are attached to have bolt heads attached to them, giving it the look of being bolted down to the floor. The sculpture sitting on top of the table has the look of some kind of Atlantean orb and worked well with the upward, floating feel of the table. Both the table and sculpture were colored using acid to oxidize the metal. Then a clear lacquer was used to give the whole table a rich multi-colored brown tone.

