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Heavy Metal

The work of artist
Chris Shea '87

CU to build NYC
tech campus—
see page 10.

Man of Steel

By Beth Saulnier



PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY CHRIS SHEA

Chris Shea '87 buys his office supplies by the ton. He commutes by walking a few yards from his house in rural Maryland—built in the Thirties with bricks scavenged from a demolished prison—to a workshop in the backyard. Forget a copier and fax machine; Shea uses an anvil, a hammer, and a coal-fired forge whose glowing orange embers hover above 2,000 degrees.

What do you do with a BA in English? If you're Shea, you go to blacksmith's school and become a metal artist. Heavily influenced by the art nouveau movement, Shea creates objects—from sculptures to furniture to candelabras to architectural elements like railings—that meld ancient techniques with modern aesthetics. "I love the sense of history," Shea says, heating a length of steel at his forge. "A forged item has that feeling of timelessness. I don't fight it, and a lot of my designs are take-offs on traditional forms. But what really motivates me is having a vision for something I want to make, and then making it."

Much of Shea's work melds metal and glass, the latter fabricated to his specifications at the Washington Glass School in suburban Maryland. His designs include a "pod-form" dining table with an ovoid base and round glass top; a fish-shaped weather-vane; a rectangular rust-finished coffee table whose glass top is dotted with circular indentations; and a sconce table whose form is reminiscent of the human spine. "Part of the appeal of combining metal and glass is that you get the sense of something rugged and strong, and then this thing that is full of light and possibly ephemeral," Shea says. "There's something poetic about that. And there's something beautiful about the way that the metal is darker and tends to absorb light, and the glass just glows."

Shea often takes inspiration from the insect world; one of his best-known pieces is a set, comprising an "arthropod side table" and two café chairs, that was recently added to the permanent collection of the Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian's craft and decorative arts museum. Its legs echo an insect's segmented limbs; the chair backs are reminiscent of a beetle's carapace; the seats and tabletop are made of bluish green glass that seems both ethereal and rock-solid. "I've always loved insects," Shea muses.

Metal artist Chris Shea '87 uses an ancient craft to create modern objects—many inspired by the insect world

“I know there is a creepy element to them, but I find them absolutely beautiful and fascinating. Often they have a feeling of something that’s built up out of parts, like a lot of my work. The shell structure is a perfect analogy to metal, and the forms I can create in metal seem to lend themselves to insect inspiration.” The table and chairs were showcased in the September/October 2011 issue of *DC* magazine, which ran a full-page photo of Shea and wrote that he “has taken his traditional concepts of craftsmanship and designs rooted in art nouveau and gone a little buggy.”

Shea’s workshop is located in Brandywine—forty minutes southeast of Washington, D.C.—where he lives with his wife, Dana Trevas, two dogs, and a cat. The space is dominated by a large steel table that does both heavy and light duty; he can weld on it, and he can sketch designs on it with soapstone. In addition to myriad chisels and other tools organized in old coffee cans, the workshop features such equipment as a century-old electric power hammer and the coal-fired forge, whose venting system he built himself. “When you get steel hot, it moves just like clay,” Shea observes. “In the finished object there can be a sense of quick motion—it’s like a frozen moment. You have the evidence of something that has flowed and curved. You can beat metal when it’s cold, but to get a sense of motion, that’s where the heat comes in.” (Shea uses the terms “iron” and “steel” more or less interchangeably; technically, he notes, steel is an alloy of iron and other elements, most commonly carbon.)

Shea also creates many of his own tools, like tongs and punches; from a recycled car axle, he made a horn-shaped gizmo that he uses as a form for circular shapes. He has several anvils; his main one—which he bought on eBay—weighs about 200 pounds, plus a sand-filled base. “Part of the appeal to people who buy, collect, and admire handmade work is that they have this sense that someone spent a lot of focused time and attention on it, and put a lot of passion into it,” Shea says. “My work will be around, I hope, for centuries. A lot of responsibility comes with that—taking minerals from the earth and turning them into items of art and craft. If it’s going to be around for hundreds of years, you should take the time to think about it.”

But Shea acknowledges that there’s a downside to creating something that labor-intensive: few people can afford his work. The insect-themed chairs cost about \$5,800 each—“They’re kind of masterpieces,” he says, “there’s so much intricate work involved”—with the set approaching \$18,000. Objects such as candelabras start at \$500, architectural elements at \$15,000. “It’s very expensive,” Shea admits. “When I first set out I wanted to make work that was more affordable, but I just don’t



If he had a hammer: Blacksmith Chris Shea '87 (opposite) creates usable works of art, such as a “hippocampus sconce table” (above) made of forged steel and cast glass.



Iron Age: (Clockwise from above) Shea at his forge; red-hot steel in the process of being formed; his “arthropod side table” and café chairs; a forged-steel candelabra entitled “Symbiotic Variation #1”; and a pediment and mismatched railings he created for a townhouse in Arlington, Virginia

have a talent for it. My talent is for labor-intensive work that I get very absorbed in and passionate about. I want to make it the best it can possibly be.”

Although the recession slowed his business for a while, things have picked up; Shea is currently booked at least a year in advance. “If you’re an independent artist, you’re everything,” he notes. “I’m the marketing department, the floor sweeper, the chief blacksmith.” In one ongoing project, he’s transforming the front stoop of a brick colonial townhouse in Arlington, Virginia; he has installed curved (and mismatched) railings and replaced the neoclassical “pineapple” pediment above the door with a bronze piece dotted with dripping glass forms. Now he’s replacing the molding on either side of the door with bronze panels. “She loves odd things, so she really lets me go,” Shea says of the owner. “She says it makes her happy every time she walks in.”

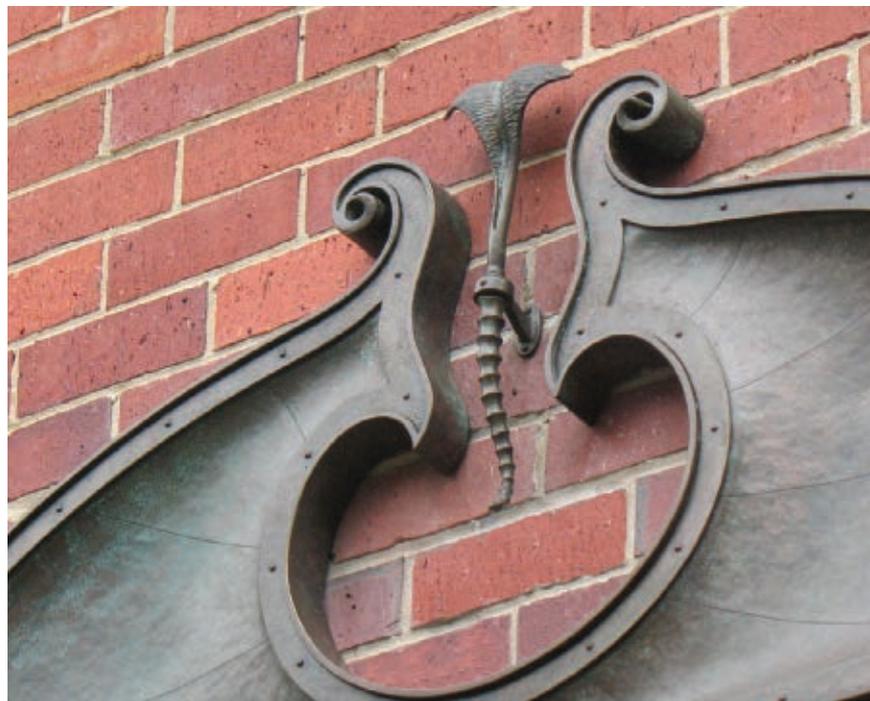
Becoming a blacksmith was not on Shea’s radar when he was growing up on suburban Boston’s North Shore, the son of an operations engineer and a homemaker. He loved writing as a high school student and majored in English with an eye toward penning the great American novel; on the Hill, he edited the film calendar for Cornell Cinema. “I think

my writing career peaked when I wrote a completely bogus blurb about *The Road Warrior*,” Shea confesses. “I said it was a musical.” After graduation, he waited tables on Capitol Hill and wrote short stories in his off hours. “It took me a while to realize that although I could write pretty well if I worked at it, I didn’t actually like doing it,” he recalls, then adds: “I became a blacksmith because writing was too hard.”

In between writing and blacksmithing were years spent working for the D.C.-based Shakespeare Theatre Company; he started in the box office and later managed its school touring company. “I could see Shakespeare plays every night of my life, and often did,” says Shea, a lifelong fan of the Bard. “I walked to work every day for five years and said to myself, ‘There’s something else I’m supposed to be doing, but I have no idea what it is.’ I found myself working with my hands, which I hadn’t done since I was a kid.”

He took classes in woodworking, ceramics, and jewelry-making; he made puppets, including an Oedipus Rex that tears out its own eyes. (He still has it, and it still wows visitors.) “I’d make a piece of wood furniture and paint it with metallic paint,” he recalls. “I’d build a ceramic vessel and glaze it with metallic glaze. I was trying to tell myself something—that I would make these things in metal if I knew how.” Eventually, he and his wife moved to rural Tennessee, where he spent two and a half years at the Appalachian Center for Craft learning blacksmithing, silversmithing, woodworking, and glassmaking. Early commissions for practical ironwork like railings and gates eventually blossomed into his current career; in addition to the Renwick, his work has been shown at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia and at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, among other venues. “I learned early on that at least in this area, I have a lot of patience,” Shea says. “I love nothing better than a challenging job that will take me months from start to finish—to design it, draw it, engineer it, and get things just right.”

Shea notes that although he uses many classic techniques, he’s not a historical blacksmith akin to those who work at Colonial Williamsburg—those for whom using only period tools is central to their calling. “There are historical smiths who are brilliant and talented, and we learn a lot from them,” he says. “It interests me, but I’m more interested in making what I want to make; I don’t use a technique because it’s old, I use it because it works. In my shop, the end justifies the means. Often you’ll find the tra-



ditional ways are the best—but a modern TIG [arc] welder is a really nice thing. If I could go back in time and offer one of those smiths the TIG welder, I think he would take it.”

Of course, blacksmithing has its occupational hazards; like a chef, Shea has been burned more times than he can count, and has bashed the occasional finger. “I’ve never had any serious burns, it’s more just an ‘ouch,’” he says. “I’ve never had to go to the emergency room, and I’ve still got all my fingers.” Next to his forge is the “slack tub,” a drum full of cold water used to control the fire or cool metal; it’s also handy for dunking a burned hand to limit tissue damage. “I’ve heard that in earlier times people would drink water from the blacksmith’s slack tub,” he adds, “because they thought it had medicinal properties.”

More worrisome are issues like tendonitis of the wrists and elbows from all that repetitive hammering—he combats it with stretches, anti-inflammatories, and lots of ice packs—as well as back problems, which bedeviled him early in his career. “I had pretty bad back trouble at first, and I was concerned that I wasn’t going to be able to do this, because I could count on being laid up a week at a time,” Shea recalls. “I started doing yoga seven or eight years ago, and that’s helped a lot; I’ll stop and do ‘downward dog’ right here on the floor.” Upon reflection, though, he blames his back pain not so much on his current career as on his previous one. “I had some back trouble before I started,” he says, “but I think that was from sitting at a desk and working at a computer.”