



Chris Shea's handmade rivet header.  
Photo: Chris Shea

#### TECH TOOLKIT

## Riveted to the Spot

The tool of the moment reflects a career's obsession.

BY CHRIS SHEA

What constitutes an essential tool? It needn't be elaborate or expensive. At this moment, the tool I can't live without is a rivet header that I recently made from a bit of old coil spring.

I forged it rather crudely after reluctantly accepting that my current project needed round-headed rivets in the one size not already represented in my coffee can full of rivet headers. It's a simple steel shaft, about seven inches long, swollen at one end where a rounded punch has been driven in to create a domed depression. The working end came out notably off-center. I've resisted the urge to go back and clean it up for the photo accompanying these words. When I strike a hot iron rod with it, a pleasing domed head is left behind.

My love affair with rivets is longstanding, and amply documented in objects I've made over the past twenty-

three years. There may be more dramatic or characteristic forms in my work, but the round-headed rivet is near-ubiquitous. I love rivets because they carry with them the history of metalwork, from suits of armor to the Brooklyn Bridge. Light spills over a domed head and flashes a bright spot amid the rough textures and hard facets of forged metal. It creates a pause, a punctuation mark among the nouns, verbs, and phrases of the overall design.

A rivet is a pragmatic little thing: two individual elements must be joined together, so a third element is made to pass through them both and expand on either end to clinch the two protagonists together. A simple blow with a hammer, without much regard to angle or other technique, will generally suffice to make a fully functioning rivet. With a bit of care, a hammer-faceted or extravagantly

**The ultimate measure of a tool is the impact it has — in this case, quite literally — on the object being made, and on the people that object reaches.**

Chris Shea  
*Limulous Door Knocker*, 2015  
steel, monel (nickel/copper alloy)  
15 × 7.5 × 2 in.  
Photo: Anything Photographic



flattened rivet can evoke the process and the hand of the maker in appealing ways, while a domed rivet might come off as impersonal and standardized. For me, however, the round-headed rivet is less about the hand of the maker than it is about the hand of the user: the person who encounters a compelling object and instinctually *has* to touch it. A rivet is an invitation to trail a finger lightly along a surface and take a ride. (I get myself in trouble at museums that way.)

There can be great pleasure in making and using a highly refined tool. I have some of those too. But I find it good to remember that the ultimate measure of a tool is the impact it has — in this case, quite literally — on the object being made, and on the people that object reaches.

*Chris Shea creates furniture and architectural metalwork at his studio outside Washington, D.C. His work can be found at [www.chris Shea.com](http://www.chris Shea.com).*