TC-00-23-FN

A G Welding see also TC-00-16, TC-00-24 (for Color Slides)

This morning I drove to Worcester and stopped at A G Welding, having made an arrangement to take photographs and observe the work process there. Al Campolitto was already at work, and told me that he'd done his forge work earlier this morning, in order to finish before the day became hot. Mr. Campolitto was working on a piece of railing which contained some decorative scroll work, so I began to watch and to take a photograph here and there. My idea was simply to hang around for as long as I could, since the shop routine is loose and several things seem to be going on at the same time. I hoped to develop an understanding gradually, as I learned how to look and thought about what to ask. Al had already told me that it was alright if I came and asked questions, but advised me that he gets "into a zone" when he's working, which meant both that my presence would not distract him, but also that he might not be "available" for questions as he worked.

At one point I did ask Al whether he had twisted the metal bars that were going into the railing, and he pointed to a pile of plain unworked metal on a rack against a wall of the shop and answered, "Here's where I get the stock. Anything other than that is what I do to it." That is, he is working with "raw" metal, and shaping it to fit the needs or demands of a particular job. In order to make the railing, Al draws an outline in chalk on the cement floor of the shop, then places the fabricated or shaped metal pieces over a matching part of the drawing. The drawing thus operates as a jig or template of sorts, or perhaps rather, an outline. He shapes each piece individually, working at a metal press, at a lathe, at the vise, or with anvil and hammer.

As he completes each piece, he lays it down on the floor, over that section of the chalk drawing. At a certain point, he begins to weld the pieces together. this morning, he asked a worker, Kujim Morava, to do some welding, or to make an adjustment to the piece he was fitting onto the developing rail. (Mr. Morava is Albanian, and understands Italian, so though his English is weak, Tony and Al can nevertheless communicate with him. In addition to Mr. Morava, Tony's son Salvatore works there in summertime (he is a student at a college in Rhode Island), and the partners also have an apprentice, Ron Remillard, who is learning the trade from them. He was recently discharged from the Marines.)

Tony Gurgone arrived at about that time, and began to work on a more "industrial" sort of job -- working with steel plate to shape it into step supports for a customer. Tony said that this is not the type of work they usually do, meaning, that their jobs usually involve a more decorative, and less industrial element. But this is a good customer, and they needed this done, he explained. But Tony explained that he and Al do all sorts of work, whatever is necessary to get a job done, from cement work to carpentry, all of which provides a foundation or a context for their iron work. For this job, Tony was marking the metal, cutting it on a large shearer, and folding it to form a narrow lip on a folding machine. He then shaped the pieces by cutting and welding them into the requisite sizes.

Most of the work done in the shop is done by hand, both Tony and Al explained. Until recently this included a lathe attachment which twists metal bars to form decorative pieces in gates and fences,

but they now have a twister attachment on their lathe which can produce this same part. "We did it by hand for many years," Tony told me, adding that they still do all scroll work by hand. "Machine scrolls kink, it's not nice and round curves. We do scrolls by hand." Tony took me outside to show me a fine fence or gate made of ornamental iron with riveted (as opposed to welded) joints, and said that they would restore the gate sometime next week. A little later I asked Al about the railing, and he said "It's a labor of love to do the Elks rail [the rail is from a mansion that someone donated to a local Elks chapter]. The guy who made it is an artist and a craftsman."

I asked where i could see other examples of their restoration work, and Tony mentioned two places in Worcester: the Burnside Building on Main Street, and St. Paul's Cathedral on High Street. I asked about restoration of fancy or decorative plaster work, and Tony said that the Burnside restoration was managed by Monaco Restorations in Southbridge, and that Paul Monaco would know the people who do that sort of work. We talked for a while about design and design ideas, and Tony told me that he and Al visit Italy, and other places in Europe (England, France, Greece) and :bring back pictures, ideas" from those places. Tony said that he's been all over Italy, and that everywhere he goes he pays attention to iron and stone work, and thinks about how they could be used or adapted here.

Jim Dowd has also talked about sources of artisanship in Europe, with reference to stone masonry. Mr. Dowd specifically mentioned Irish and Italian artisans as having played an important role in building the structural and the ornamental infrastructure of New England. Worcester County would provide a fertile ground to explore these issues further, and link them with ethnicity and with ethnic craft and culture more specifically, and in greater detail.

After leaving A G Welding, I made a few additional stops, first in Worcester to visit the restoration sites Tony had mentioned, then in Gardner to see Len Curcio at Wayside Furniture, and then Winchendon, where I visited briefly with Jack Bowler and his wife, and went one more time to the industrial park, hoping to find Paula-A-Bear or someone else at Woodspeople Intertribal Village. There was a red van with a canoe tied to the roof parked next to the building, but no one was in sight either around or inside the building, or in the woods where the group maintain its trails and other facilities. I guessed I'd return another time for a talk with Paula and to take photographs of her work, and drove to Athol, then on to Ashburnham, where I stopped to see Norman Hobbs, a blacksmith who does mainly small scale ornamental work (lamps, sconces, and other small decorative pieces).

Norman Hobbs, blacksmith

Mr. Hobbs works metal over a coal fired forge. He told me that he learned his trade from his father, who was a blacksmith from Devon, England who came here and found work at Springfield Armory. Later, he opened a business in Fitchburg, doing practical work (making horseshoes and hardware) as well as ornamental work (decorative fences, gates, railings, and other more free form pieces such as lamps and sconces. Norman's father repaired wagons too, and Mr. Hobbs has an old wagon wheel or two in his shop, and also has the wooden hubs. Norman Hobbs told me that "We used to do a lot of work on wagon wheels," and described the process of putting a metal tire on an old wooden wheel. Norman's father was Albert Hobbs. His son told me he's been working out of the location in Ashburnham for nearly 50 years, adding that his father also worked there for a while in the years when he first opened. "There are blacksmiths from way back in the family," Mr. Hobbs said. "On my father's side."

I asked about the sources of his designs, and Mr. Hobbs answered that the design ideas are his own. "I just make it up," he told me. He said that his business has slowed down recently, possibly because customers can shop on the Internet, find anything, including ornamental iron, there. So fewer and fewer people are stopping, and Mr. Hobbs is slowing down, spending time in both Florida and Maine at different parts of the year. As a result, it takes longer to finish projects, and fill special orders. He has an order for a bed frame outstanding at the moment, and he's worked on that on and off. The frame is not an active project at the moment, however, and Mr. Hobbs is planning to go to Maine in the next few days.

"A lot of guys today do more heating with gas," Mr. Hobbs told me. "Acetylene. Not too many play with the old forge." He uses what he calls "smithy coal" which he says is necessary for forge work. "It's a very soft coal, a very hot coal," Mr. Hobbs said. "You can't weld without coal." Mr. Hobbs said that "old timers come in, and they like the smell of the old forge. But the young people don't like it. It's too hot, and too much work." While on the subject of fuels, Mr. Hobbs told me that he knows someone from Maine who uses coke, and he thinks that Sturbridge village uses charcoal. "I used to make lamps for Yankee Sturbridge Workshop, near Sturbridge. And I made utility tongs for Abercrombie & Fitch, in different lengths." He has also done important restoration projects, one of these involved restoring an old cannon that is now at the battlefield at Antietem. I asked about the railings around the house in back of the shop, and Mr. Hobbs said that the original dates back to the Civil War, and surrounds a small graveyard within the Meeting House Hill Cemetery in town. Mr. Hobbs restored the original, and used the remaining iron to decorate his own house and porch. I asked about the metal work in the fence, which looked as though some of it at least had been poured or molded in a foundry. My notes do not say whether this fence used molded parts, but Mr. Hobbs said that at one time there were foundries around Fitchburg, and currently there is Harris Foundries in Orange, who do brass and iron, he told me. I mentioned Jeffrey Bronnes in Royalston, and asked whether he had heard of him, but Mr. Hobbs said that he hadn't.

I think that foundry work is an important part of ornamental metal work, and should be pursued as part of a more general look at decorative iron and metal work in general in the county. In fact, a

materials based approach, while not entirely sufficient as a means of exploring artisanship here, could provide a very useful starting point, at least from a methodological standpoint. It would make it possible to draw comparisons and contrasts, understand how materials fit together into a single project (and thus explore the interrelations of skill based activity in the county), and begin to examine the relationship of artisanship to geography and more broadly, to place, since two of these materials, granite and wood, are extracted locally by artisans. In my work in the country so far, I have made contact with people working with granite, iron, steel, brass, copper, wood, clay, quills, leather, silk, and glass, though I would say that the last instance, glass, (and perhaps also silk) may form a special case.

Mr. Hobbs said that he's taught one or two people a part of his trade, but most people aren't interested, or the work is too hard, the environment too hot. He had the most luck with a mainstream artist, a woman, who wanted to learn a little bit about blacksmithing in order to complete a project she was working on
at the time. Mr. Hobbs has also taught a grandson how to work the forge and shape metal (he had a piece on display in the shop that his grandson had made; I photographed this piece, but the photo apparently did not turn out). There is a minor theme of apprenticeship among artisans I interviewed for this project, but in my view it is not a strong one. The Kosticks have taught their daughters to work with glass, but it seems that they mainly add a dimension to the business and are not carrying out the principal activity there. Jim Dowd has a son who is learning, and at A G Welding, Tony Gurgone's son has worked with his father for years, but is mainly interested in computers. It might be worth exploring further, but at the moment, it doesn't appear to be a strong focus of artisans activity here.

TC-00-23-FN

A G Welding/Al Campolitto

I returned to A G Welding today, having been there yesterday (22 June), to ask a follow up question and perhaps also to take an additional photograph. This day the shop was quieter than it had been yesterday, as Al had indicated it would be. I watched as Tony worked on a small job, then went to get my camera to take additional photographs of the Elks mansion fence that Al will restore. I did so, then went into the office to photograph a series of chairs, prototypes, that Al has made over the years. I admired one of these, and Al, who was sitting at an office desk, said that he didn't like any of them, that they were made as experiments, and he later refined the designed and produced chairs for customers that he liked much better than these. Al pulled out a scrapbook with photographs under clear plastic, and thumbed through it to show me examples of his work. These included some very handsome benches, which he said are sold at a garden center in Brookfield. He also did a dozen benches and a "header across the roof" for the Millbury Community Center. "You can see it from the bridge," Al told me.

i asked about the design of the band, and Al said that people wanted something in an English style, something not too fancy, no Spanish scroll work. So one day in winter, I had the time , so i took a day and putzed around." he came up with the basic design that day, he told me. I asked whether he copyrighted any of his work and Al scoffed at the idea. "Copyright? No! What copyright? My father used to get mad, he'd see a design that we made [on someone else's work]. But I say, 'How can you setal a design?'" Al said that he thinks about context, where a piece will be seen from, whether it will be inside or outside, in thinking about designing a piece or filling an order for an ornamental work. He makes a distinction between free form and classical form, and I think he said that his work combines elements of both, the constraint of the classical form and the more flowing, organic figurations in free form work. Occasionally, he told me, "people want me to work according to a specific plan, but generally, I say 'Trust me.' But I don't know how it will look. I get into a zone, and I'm surprised myself. But generally speaking, if I like it, the customer will like it."

"I've always been amazed why wrought iron is not more appreciated than it is. You have to have the mind set of a sculptor, the strength of a sculptor, the mind of an artist, and the practicality of a builder," Al told me. Iron work has function, design, "it's part of the rhythm of everything else in a house." I asked whether he ever consults books, or reads about iron work, and Al said "There are no books out there. I have just about every book on wrought iron." But, Al told me, "You never hear of a wrought iron worker as a medium he's known for. Artists find pieces and put them together, but it's not the same as starting out with raw metal." And of course, there's a lot of eyeballing and ad hoc judgment that goes into shaping a piece of raw metal, as I observed while visiting the shop yesterday and watching Al and Tony work. At that point, Tony's son Salvatore came in, and having heard something of our conversation, said that they'd tried to design a job on a computer, or to make use of a computer generated design on a job site once, "And it didn't fit. We had to do a lot of tinkering."

Larry Niikwartey Quarartey

Later that day I had a brief interview with a Ghanaian fashion designer whom Dickson had arranged for me to meet. His name is Larry Niikwartey Quarartey, he lives in Fitchburg and works in Worcester for a company that produces religious costumes for the Catholic church, and is designing his own clothes and hoping that someone will notice and become an advocate for his work. There is an interesting style in some of his pieces, which combine western with African motifs, fabrics, and styles, but since he has been working here he's mainly decorated western style clothing with African elements. We talked about his working in the other direction, and transforming western dress more completely into an African style, and he told me that he did that sort of work, and would show it to me next time we met. I took his number, and I indicated that I would get in touch with him when I was next in town.