

ArtWorks WEST VIRGINIA

FEATURES

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A conversation with the award-winning metal artist, whose world-class artworks are created in a hand-built studio in Hedgesville.

6 Poetry Out Loud Names 2019 Champion

Brett Napier, a Greenbrier East High School senior, won the statewide recitation contest and represented West Virginia at the national Poetry Out Loud competition in Washington, D.C. in April.



The 2019 Poetry Out Loud recitation competition included a collaborative interpretation of Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem," performed by 2018 POL state champion Jordyn Marshall, left, and sign language interpreter Jasmin Cannisi. Also featured in the performance were dancer Henry Leef and violinist Alasha Al-Qudwah.

8 Culture Center Hosts STEAM Power WV Showcase

More than \$160,000 in grants help organizations integrate the arts into STEM education.

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Jim Justice, Governor



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Lee Badger: Forged in West Virginia

A Conversation with an Award-winning Metal Artist and Designer

By Jack O'Hearn

Photos courtesy of Lee Badger

In the Eastern Panhandle town of Hedgesville, tucked away under trees is a small, rustic building made from beautifully aged and locally sourced oak, capped with a burgundy tin roof. The door to enter, made from quarter-sawn oak, features ornamental forged hinge-plates inspired by Celtic and Maori tribal tattoos. Above hangs a sign stating, "Anvil Works, Est. 1983, Lee Badger, Prop." The versatile metals studio, built in 1998 by blacksmith artist Lee Badger, features traditional forge, anvil and hand tools that have remained a blacksmith's trademark for centuries. However, traditional tools don't mean the shop strictly adheres to traditional methods. Modern forges, contemporary cutting and welding tools, and compressed air and power tools can also be found. The studio is primarily devoted to sculpture, furniture making, and interior or architectural commissions along with the occasional historic restoration project.

Badger began his life-long career in Denver in the 1970s where he was among the first wave of apprentices trained by masters of the Mid-Century American Craft Revival. He eventually moved to the Washington, D.C. area to work as an artist-in-residence at Glen Echo National Park in 1989. Ten years later, with business increasing, he became interested in building his own shop somewhere in the region, settling in Hedgesville. The Panhandle's easy access to industrial resources and transportation routes to large cities such as D.C., Baltimore, and Pittsburgh, made it an ideal location.

A member of numerous guilds and associations, Badger has received several honors and awards, including 2008 and 2014 Professional Development grants from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts.

Lee Badger lives and works at Anvil Works, the studio he built in 1998 in Hedgesville, WV.





Lee Badger with his most widely exhibited sculpture, *Comma*, on the corner of Market Street and Salem Ave, in downtown Roanoke, VA, 2008.

You've said you were trained by masters of the Mid-Century American Craft Revival, was this at a college or university, or did you learn through apprenticeships?

I started out working for Ivan Bailey at his studio in Savanna, GA before enrolling at Metro State College in Denver, CO. There, I used my veteran's education benefits to earn credit for study at Slim Spurling's blacksmithing school, Skunk Hollow Forge, in Morrison, CO.

At the time, there were very few academic degree programs for blacksmithing. I settled on majoring in metal because there were fewer people going into it, which meant

less competition in that field. I realized my interests in blacksmithing would inevitably lead me away from higher education and into the world of apprenticeships: training with established craftsmen offering craft instruction. It was just the right time to get in with the emerging leaders of the blacksmithing craft revival, like Francis Whitaker and Alex Weygers. I was learning from those who were transforming an old traditional trade into a modern, artistic craft.

Can you describe a commission or artwork you are most proud of?

I am proud of all my work, but my most important commission to date

is the Victorian Clock Tower I created for the Sanfilippo Collection in Barrington, IL. The collection features outstanding mechanical devices from the pre-electrical age, including pipe and band organs, street and tower clocks, steam engines, and other functional mechanical antiques. All are beautifully restored and in perfect working condition. The 10 ft. x 10 ft. x 30 ft. tower was designed to house a very large historic clock needing a display tower large enough to allow a long drop for the heavy weights necessary to operate it.

Together with an architect, collection curators, and clock restorers, we created the tower's functional and ornamental details. The tower combines more than eleven tons of hand forged elements, castings, stampings, ornamental and structural steel. It was featured in *Fabricator Magazine*, the showcase publication of the National Ornamental and Miscellaneous Metals Association, and it was published in *Ironwork Today 2*, a recurring survey of outstanding work by leading contemporary artist-blacksmiths.

What made you choose West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle as a location for your shop?

When my time was coming to an end as an artist-in-residence with the National Park Service at Glen Echo Park in suburban Washington, D.C., I began to look for a place where I could create a workshop of my own design. My work at Glen Echo had an audience limited to the Washington metro area. If I really wanted to expand my work creatively as well as geographically, I needed to get out of town. I knew that any urban or suburban locations available to me would be too expensive and cramped for my needs. I wanted a more relaxed and unconfined environment, not an industrial one.

It took only a few excursions before I discovered the Eastern



In the Anvil Works workshop restoring bronze filigree created by Louis Comfort Tiffany Studios in 1905 for Evergreen, home of the Garrett family, founders of the B&O Railroad.

Panhandle. It connects so easily in the Mid-Atlantic region that I could still be conveniently connected to the metropolitan markets and resources. It's easy to reach the extensive industrial resources of Baltimore, where the country's largest supplier of ornamental metals, tools, and equipment has their east coast distribution center.

My biggest reason for coming to the Eastern Panhandle was finding a place I could afford. I wanted a nice, restorable old house with a location only a few miles from Interstate 81, where I could build an art metal workshop. When I discovered that the house had been occupied in the 19th century by Hedgesville's own blacksmith, Charles Wolfe, I was sold. Twenty years later, I'm still refining and improving the house and the shop. It's my dream come true.

Can you describe one big challenge you've faced in your career and how you've overcome it?

It's been a constant challenge keeping up with changes in the market. At first, I did a lot of ornamental iron railings, fences, and gates. But, when metal supply companies began to sell mass produced forgings, it became possible for welding shops to fabricate fancy ironwork just by following patterns for the assembly of ready-made parts. As an individual designer-craftsman, I couldn't compete with that kind of paint-by-number work.

I created more furniture and caught the wave of popularity for what was then called "studio furniture."

Lee Badger in his workshop.





Above: Restoring an ornate entrance canopy created by Tiffany Studios in 1905 on the Evergreen Museum and Library, a Johns Hopkins University Museum in Baltimore, MD.

Opposite: The Victorian Clock Tower was created to house a large courthouse clock, removed long ago from its original tower, but now restored and in working condition at the Sanfilippo Collection in Barrington Hills, IL.

Most craft furniture makers are woodworkers, so my metal furniture designs stood out. Unfortunately, the popularity faded and many craft galleries that featured designer-craftsman furniture closed.

During the furniture phase I began to create sculpture, and I found great creative inspiration and enjoyment participating in public art programs. I've sold a few and I have eight sculptures currently in public art circulation.

Now, there's no single category that predominates my work. I have clients for finely crafted ornamental iron and some for custom-made furniture. Historic preservation jobs have joined the mix. I like sculpture the best, but I firmly believe in the idea that you get what you give, so I try to be as versatile as possible.

What advice would you give someone wanting to configure their own blacksmithing shop?

Those wanting to create their own shop should think of it like planning a dream kitchen. You want to have all the "appliances" – forge, anvil, saws, grinders, drill press and vices – all conveniently arranged into work areas, with plenty of well-organized storage for materials, extra tools and equipment.

Plan for open space. Structural posts and poles are obstructions, and ceilings must be high enough to be out of the way. Electrical power cords can get in the way of almost everything, so think about rigging them overhead with any number of different systems available for this purpose. A good ventilation system, and a lighting system with a variety of easily controlled sources for task lighting and general illumination, is key. In my shop, I also have a propane system for gas forges and torches, and a compressed air system for other tools and equipment.

Keep everything as moveable as you can and fit the legs of your worktables with wheeled trailer jacks,



so you can jack them up and roll them in to different positions with ease. Use tool carts and customize them for different kinds of work, like welding-only on one cart, all forge tools on another. Make your own storage racks to keep supplies and materials organized and out of the way but near where you use them most.

It's also important to have a

separate, closed office space for records, workbooks, and electronic devices. This keeps important paperwork and devices away from the grit and grim that accumulates in the shop.

The perfect shop has flexible, convenient work areas for different tasks and plenty of well-organized space for the safe use and operation of all the tools and equipment.