



connecticut blacksmith michael j. saari uses centuries-old techniques to craft his reproduction home hardware as well as his modern sculptural furniture and art pieces.

## HISTORY IN HAND

TEXT BY ROBERT KIENER | PORTRAIT BY JULIE BIDWELL

**C**laaaaack! Claaaaack!" Michael J. Saari's deep blue eyes light up as he demonstrates one of his hand-forged steel reproduction Suffolk door latches. "Do you hear that?" he asks as he presses down on the sturdy door latch with one of his beefy, blacksmith-battered thumbs. "That's the sound of quality. You won't hear that with a sheet metal reproduction



latch you'd find in a hardware store."

As he balances the hefty forged latch on the palm of his heavily callused hand and bounces it in the air, he explains, "This has weight and volume to it. It has soul. Don't you love it?"

Can a piece of steel have soul? Anyone who has visited Michael Saari's Woodstock, Connecticut, workshop will agree that it can. For the last two decades this internationally known blacksmith, craftsman and artist has been transforming hunks of raw steel into things of uncommon beauty. Using the same techniques blacksmiths have been using for centuries, Saari, fifty, has produced both functional and artistic metalwork: everything from intricate medieval locks to elegant hinges to inspired metalwork sculpture. His work has been selected for scores of public collections around the world, such as Mount Vernon, the John Quincy Adams House, Trinity Church and Colonial Williamsburg. "Mike is an artist who just happens to work in steel," says Old Lyme industrial designer and Saari client, Siro Toffolon. "He is as meticulous as he is creative."

Saari's attraction to blacksmithing and metalworking began while he was still a boy. "I remember seeing a set of medieval armor in the Higgins Armory in Worcester, Massachusetts, when I was a teen," he says. "I was instantly hooked."

He worked summers at Old Sturbridge Village and learned the basics of blacksmithing. He studied history and art at Nichols College but never lost his love for the blacksmith's glowing forge and hammer and tongs. "It got in my blood," he says. He was lured by the technique as much as the chance to study and replicate the best of the craftsmen that had come before him. He spent countless hours in libraries and museums examining how earlier blacksmiths had designed and crafted their metalwork.

After college he took up blacksmithing full time, thanks to a raft of commissions from places like the Minute-man National Park and Faneuil Hall.

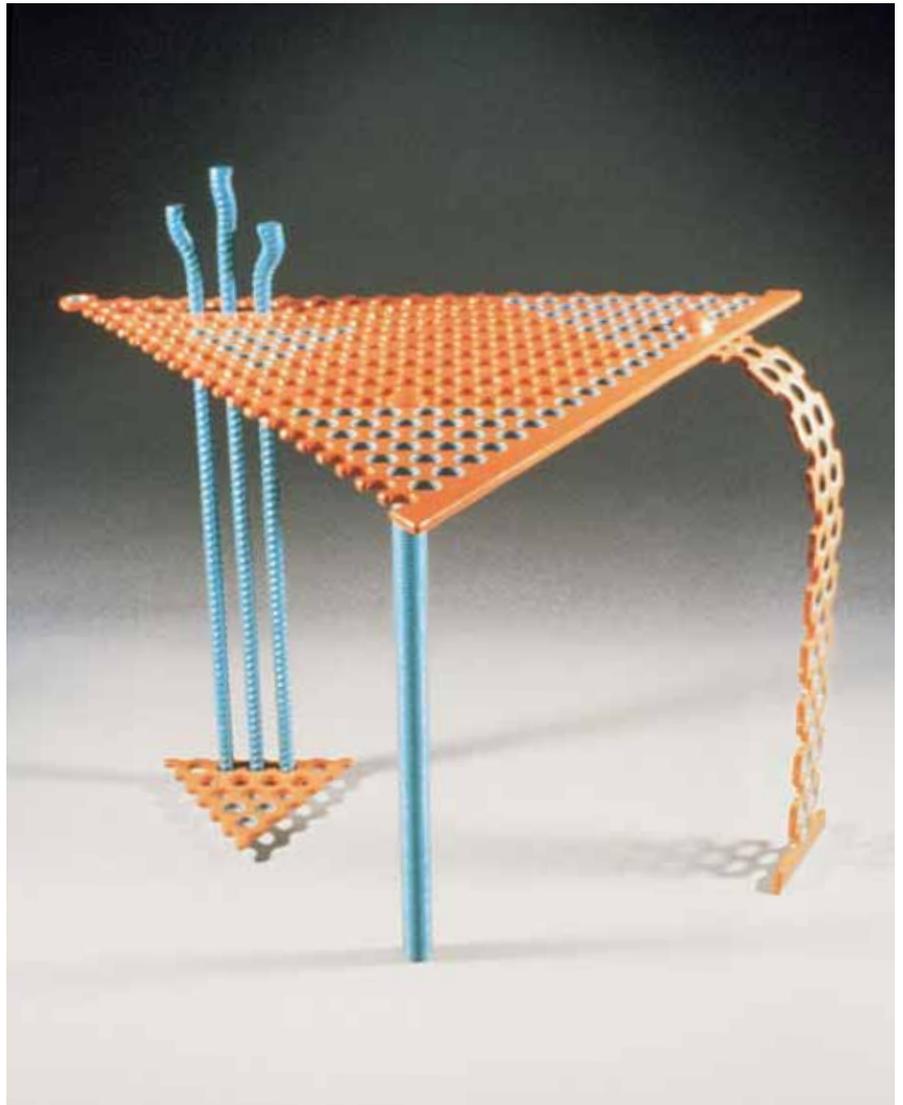
**Hardware door hinges of  
forged steel, 24"**

1/3 page vertical  
AD



There was a lot of work then from historic venues that wanted faithful reproductions of original hardware and metalwork. Because Saari used traditional techniques and knew the history

behind the hardware, he was the perfect choice. He recalls spending four days to duplicate an intricate lock, complete with an ornate key and a complicated internal mechanism, for





Obviously detail and process mean a lot to Saari; he stamps his name or initials on almost every piece of metalwork that comes out of his shop. “Maybe in a hundred years someone will pick up a piece of mine and wonder, ‘Who was Michael Saari?’” he says. “I like that.”

Although Saari uses a propane-powered forge as well as a more traditional coal forge to heat steel to 2,000 degrees, most of his tools are the same ones his predecessors have used over the centuries. As he pulls a quarter-inch square piece of mild steel from the gas forge’s glowing innards, he wipes a few beads of perspiration from his brow. Between hammer blows on the anvil he explains, “This is exactly the same way they made nails 200 years ago.”

A few deft hammer blows to the glowing head and he proudly holds up his nail. He lops off the end and dips it into a can of cold water that hisses as the red-hot nail cools. He makes it look so easy, but later explains, “It takes about ten years before you get really good at working metal.”

Saari says that homeowners, architects and designers often overlook hardware and ironware. “Getting the correct ironwork is really the icing on the cake,” he says. “The secret is in the details. If you examine colonial hardware you’ll discover there’s a sensitivity to the flow of line. Faithful reproduction demands the same commitment to line and material.”

Siro Toffolon, whose home has more than 100 of Saari’s pieces of faithfully reproduced hardware, is an unabashed Saari admirer. Says Toffolon, “One of my design teachers used to say, ‘He who works with his hands is a laborer. He who works with his hands and his mind is a craftsman. He who works with his hands and his mind and his heart is an artist.’ Mike Saari is an artist.” **NEH**

**EDITOR'S NOTE** Michael J. Saari can be reached at (860) 928-0257. For more information and to see his work, go to [www.michaelsaari.com](http://www.michaelsaari.com).

**TOP: Cathedral door, sculptural hardware and cast and forged bronze, 16' × 24"**

**LEFT: Headstrong (2002), cast iron sculpture, 12"**