



This smithy is still hammering away

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Jerry Wolfe, 73, looks to nature to give his pieces an artistic flair.

Since he retired in 2003, Jerry Wolfe's goal has been to make enough money metalworking to cover the rent of his Whitfield-area workshop.

That happened only once, but he forges on to perpetuate the blacksmith trade. While he creates both utilitarian and whimsical items, Wolfe prefers to use techniques employed for centuries to give them an artistic flair.

He heats, hammers and twists metal into delicate-looking flowers that belie their weight or into sturdy, but ornate, headboards for beds. Among his specialties are candle holders, trivets for hot pots, garden gates, wall hooks, table bases, wall hangings, and sculptures large and small.

"I look at nature – What does nature do? – and try to emulate some of those kinds of things," Wolfe said.

Inspiration also comes from old places: ornate iron work in a grill pattern on windows at the Ringling Museum of Art comes to mind. A river cruise in Austria and Germany sparked ideas that later translated into one of Wolfe's contemporary pieces.

Wolfe tapped his wit for his entry in the juried "Daily News" show that opens Oct. 15 and continues through Nov. 21 at Art Center Sarasota. He spent about 50 to 60 hours creating "Tree Tower" – thinking, sketching, pounding, shaping, sanding, grinding and finishing.

He used iron made in the early 1900s that was salvaged from a water tower being torn down in Inverness. Copper patina makes the iron trunk, roots and three limbs glisten if the sculpture is in just the right light. At the top of one limb is a shiny gold band with the word "Wifi" engraved. Will show patrons get that the piece is Wolfe's interpretation of a modern cellphone tower? He hopes they do.

"There is a difference between craft and fine art," Wolfe said. "Is it fine art or is it not? It depends on the price you attach to it. Blacksmiths tend to price their things too low."

Seeking to elevate the opinion of blacksmithing as an art rather than a craft, he became a member of both ArtCenter Manatee and Art Center Sarasota. Wolfe put his work in the Muse Galleria artist co-op and was approved to join the selective Creative Arts Association of Lakewood Ranch a year ago.

"Definitely when we saw Jerry's work, we thought it was something new and different for our group," association member Mary Litle said.

In addition to being very creative, Wolfe is just a great person to be around, she said, and inviting him to join was a smart decision.

He was a four-year president of the Florida Artist Blacksmith Association, which aims to promote and preserve the art of blacksmithing. One of the group's special projects is working with Boy Scouts who are earning the metalworking badge. A favorite project is turning an old railroad spike into a tool to use to turn steaks on a grill.

Wolfe understands the science behind his art. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in metallurgical engineering in 1964 from Indiana Institute of Technology, then spent the next 39 years working for The Timken Co. in Canton, Ohio, which manufactures bearings and other industrial products.

At 73, he still works as an independent heat treating consultant and an auditor, but when the creative spark flares up, Wolfe is in his Wolfe Forge workshop, heating up his coals, ready to shape another piece of metal.

Not every piece will get sold.

A member of Lakewood Ranch Baptist Church, he donates his art to help raise money to support mission work. A patio table he made sold for more than \$500 last year.

A sculpture he and another church member designed was installed outside of the Florida Baptist Children's Home in Lakeland. The arms of an aluminum cross are bent to embrace a globe.

"The symbolism is that Jesus has the world in his hands," Wolfe said.

He was a widower when he met his wife, Irene. They have been married since 1995 and have seven children between them. Wolfe rattled off the handmade pieces dotting the south Manatee home they share: end table, wall art, bed headboard, wall hanging in the kitchen, candle holders, trivet on the stove, hooks on curtain rods, a trellis and a hand-forged bird in the flower garden.

"My wife gets the first right of refusal," he said.

The rest might, or might not, garner a fair price from someone who appreciates the marriage of a master craft with fine art.



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