

Jeffrey Sass

A Journey in Metal

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Photography by

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It all started with a desire to learn how to weld. Little did Jeffrey Sass know that the simple yearning to learn a new skill would lead him into the world of metal sculpture and the creation of a body of work that's drawn appreciative fans from around the country.

"I thought I was going to be a lawyer," Sass says with a grin, his shoulder-length white hair held back from his forehead by a bandana tied around his head. "This just happened."

"This" is a career in metal sculpting that mixes high-end art with a dedication to upcycling metal objects that the rest of us would probably consign to a scrap pile.

"I love to mix the practical and the artistic," Sass says. "It's the challenge that makes what I do all the more interesting."

Sass's artistic career began with a simple phone call in 1976. His wife, Torrelee, was making jewelry at the time and she'd learned that the sculptor Judith Brown, who maintained a residence in Vermont (and later in New York City as well), was looking for someone to help her in her studio. Brown wasn't interested in hiring Torrelee.

Jeffrey Sass creates high-end art with a dedication to upcycling metal objects that the rest of us would probably consign to a scrap pile.

"I need a strong man to help me with welding," Brown told her. "Know anyone who might be interested?"

Brown was a slight woman, a dancer and metal sculptor whose work reflected her interest in the movements of the body.



Left: A commission for UVM called "The Lamentations," a series of five walking figures that Sass recently restored. Right: A firescreen with trees



(Brown died in 1992.) Her welding skills were limited, Sass discovered, and she had never tackled the art of electric welding, a fact that limited the size of the works she could create.

"I taught myself how to weld in Judy's studio," Sass explains. "And when I taught myself how to do electric welding, the size of her sculptures increased in scale because you can do larger works with that type of welding."

Long before art schools became the training ground for people with a hankering for the creative life, artists served apprenticeships, learning their craft and honing their skills with an established master. Sass had unwittingly stumbled into just that sort of opportunity. As he worked with Brown, he learned how to manipulate the crushed steel of automobiles so it would emulate the folds in cloth. Volkswagen fenders, roofing tin, crushed barrels and oil cans

became body parts. Not only did Sass have the opportunity to hone his welding and metal fabrication skills, he began to see the possibilities in metal for himself.

Sass and his family settled in Quechee, Vt., soon after he started working with Brown, and it wasn't long before he established his own shop. It was small at first but it gave him the space he needed to work on the forms that fascinated him and with materials — particularly stainless steel and bronze — that called to his creativity more than crushed steel.

While Brown's sculptural interests had a foundation in her dancing career, Sass' interests were more a reflection of his surroundings — the flow of water, birds and especially trees.

"I have a real fondness for trees," Sass says. "They've become something of a specialty of mine."

This fondness is reflected in the graceful trees that sway and bend in an eternal metallic dance across the back window of Sass' pickup truck. >>>>



Jeffrey Sass grinds a tree sculpture for a firescreen in his Quechee, Vt., shop.



Jeffrey Sass stands by the 'S' stairway in his shop. It is made of recycled steam radiators.

to pass. That sounds weird, I know, but the concentration is so fierce that the process becomes my only function."

Like most artists, Sass thrives on variety, and his now quite accomplished welding skills have opened doors he could not have imagined years ago. Over time and because of his familiarity with Brown's work and his part in it as an associate artist, he has been hired by the Pepsi Cola Corporation, private collec-

tors of Brown's work, the University of Vermont and Johnson State College to restore some of the outdoor sculptures created by Brown and Sass that have deteriorated because of exposure to the elements. These sculptural rescue missions and his knowledge of metals and their history led to one of his favorite projects — the restoration of antique railings and gates for Champlain College.

"They had 125 feet of metal antique

railings and two beautiful gates that were installed somewhere around 1890," Sass says. Champlain College was established in Burlington, Vt., in 1878. His commission, which took several months of painstaking restoration work and attention to detail, was part of the college's complete retrofit and renovation of the oldest building on campus, the Roger H. Perry Hall. Everyone who visits Champlain now walks through the restored gates because Perry Hall is the school's welcome, advising and financial aid center.

Some Upper Valley antique dealers have discovered Sass' ability to combine his artistic sensibilities and practical skills in projects that enhance their finds. One dealer, Meryl Weiss of Ameri-



A floor register made from a bronze church kneeling rail

can Classics in White River Junction, commissioned him to turn an antique tricycle into a coffee table. He has devised ingenious hanging systems for a display of intricately carved canes, repaired antique weather vanes, and fabricated table bases for pieces of old European marble.

"I love to do that stuff," he says with a grin. "It's such a challenge to figure out a way to augment or fix or make something new that doesn't draw attention to just itself but blends in as though it's always been a part of the antique."

Sass's artistic practicality (or practical artistry, as he likes to call it) is found in a myriad of ways throughout his home and studio. There's a spiraling set of metal stairs in his studio, carefully reconfigured from decorative cast iron radiators, that turns in angles that seem to defy geometry. Part of an early 20th century altar piece is now a decorative surrounding for the gas stove in the kitchen. Every floor grate that delivers heat from the wood-fired furnace is different from all the others, each owing its unique style to Sass's ability to envision a reuse for metal structures that the rest of us would simply pass by.

"It's been quite a journey in metal," he says as he picks up a torch. "You just never know where it's going to take you." UVL



Sass and his dog, Zorro, are reflected in his "Inspiration Charlotte's Web" mirror. See if you can find characters Wilbur, Templeton, Radiant and Charlotte.



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