

Creative Living

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Hardware unlocks metalsmith's career

By C. L. Rugenstein
special writer

When metalsmith and jewelry designer James Starr graduated from Cranbrook's Master of Fine Art's program, he asked his professor, master metalsmith Richard Thomas, "How can I make a living at metalsmithing?" Most metalsmiths became teachers or jewelers to make it, Starr knew, and teaching didn't appeal to him.

"Darned if I know," Thomas replied, "but if you find out, tell me." Hardware was the answer for Starr — a line of handmade, designer door and drawer pulls sold only at Russell Hardware in Bloomfield Hills and a national catalogue called "Arktektura."

"After graduation I asked myself, what in the world is made out of metal that people will buy, and can afford," Starr recalled. He'd just made some hardware for his own house in Birmingham and the idea struck him to design some hardware pulls. "People who have a kitchen might buy 40, or even four of something," Starr reasoned.

SO HE TOOK a month off. Every morning in the shower, his favorite thinking spot, he'd dream up a design. Then he'd go out to the studio in his garage and build it. When he had about 40 designs he decided to approach Russell Hardware. "Not knowing that they're probably the best hardware store in the Midwest," he said.

Russell's liked the idea, because at one time J. Robert Swanson, son-in-law of Eliel Saarinen and a designer himself, had approached them with one of his hardware designs. It had sold "incredibly well," Starr said.

"It took three months before they started selling, then someone stole a third of the collection," Starr smiled ruefully. "So I redesigned some of the bad pieces and added more designs."

One of the designs was picked up by "Arktektura," a nationally circulated catalogue of architect-de-



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

James Starr's large studio in Pontiac in a converted factory building that once housed Oakland Motors has a special mean-

ing from that will hold kindling, and firewood will be stacked in the bottom of the large outer circle.

Starr has done other pieces for Monaghan's executive suite. He didn't have a picture of it so he pulled out the blueprint of the candelabra that stands on the suite's huge conference table. Eight feet long and weighing 127 pounds, it was designed by Birkerts as a take off of Falling Water, the Frank Lloyd Wright house in Pennsylvania. Multi-leveled, with narrow brass bars that hold six removable candle holders which stand only nine inches tall.

"I'll make things like chandeliers, fireplace fronts, furniture — anything that can be made in metal," Starr said. He frequently collaborates on furniture with cabinetmaker, John Dalek, who has a studio in the same building.

Starr is excited about a current

project that came to him with the help of Ken Smith.

With Cranbrook's 50th anniversary approaching, Smith got authority to reproduce furniture from the Saarinen family residence at Cranbrook.

STARR HAD ALREADY met Ron Swanson, son of Eliel Saarinen's daughter Pipesen and J. Robert Swanson, architect, and had done repairs on some of the family metal work. Swanson was excited also about the metalwork reproduction project, and already knew Starr's work.

"So Ken Smith called and said, 'Jim, how would you like to be licensed to reproduce these pieces?' And the seed was planted," Starr said.

He brought out a book of photographs of the pieces he's reproducing. "They're all basically one of a kind. There's only one piece I

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turned down and it's being done by another metalsmith," he said.

Starr flipped to one of his favorite but most difficult pieces in the collection, a green torchier. "For this one I've got sand castings, lost wax castings and extrusion work." He ticked off the processes involved. "The stem is ribbed and the spun bowl (shade) is copper.

The torchier is made of bronze, but the forest green color is chemically induced. "It's called the patina process," he said.

A native of Oakland country, Starr has come full circle personally with the move to the larger studio in Pontiac. The converted four floor factory building is across the street from the building that once housed Oakland Motors, which became Pontiac Motors. Starr's father, the late Buel Starr, worked summers as a teenager, test driving woodie prototypes for Oakland.

When Oakland became Pontiac he worked his way through the ranks to become a vice president before retiring. Starr credits his father's natural ability with tools and being able to make "anything he wanted to" for influencing him. The art, apart from his own ability, came from his mother, whose collection of art books he used to pore over.

Of his own professional odyssey Starr said, "I live by these damned platitudes." One of Richard Thomas' platitudes, advice for surviving the competition was "You have to outlast the b—s." Starr said.

His favorite, which seems to reflect his own experience and attitudes, came from water colorist and stained glass artist, Mark Adams. Adams was 50 years old when his work gained prominence.

"He'd done everything to make ends meet," said Starr, a neighbor of Adams when both lived in San Francisco, "including operating an elevator. His platitude was 'the sugar's in the bottom of the cup.'"

'They're primarily brass, and I approach them as I do the jewelry (which he still makes for private commissions) so they have a high level of craftsmanship; they don't look like manufactured pieces.'

— James Starr
metalsmith

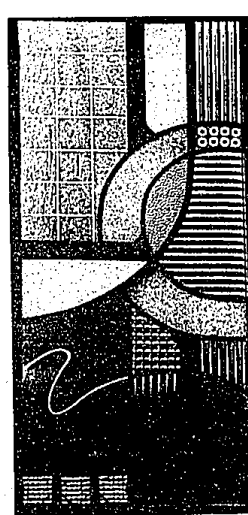
Galleries celebrate Michigan glass month



"Space Cup #104" is one of the works in glass by more than 100 artists that are part of the 16th Glass Invitational exhibition at Habitat Galleries of Southfield. There is a second Habitat exhibit at the Triatra office complex of Farmington. Habitat Galleries is at 22255 Southfield, Lathrup Village. Triatra is at 32255 Northwestern, Farmington.



Stained-glass panels and windows by Ron Rae of Birmingham, left, and Barbara Krueger of Hartland (formerly of Southfield), right, are in the "Michigan Glass '88" exhibition at the Oakland County Galleria in the Executive Office Building, 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac. The show of fused, blown and stained glass is



open to the public 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday and noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through April. Krueger is an active member of the Michigan Glass Guild. Rae is a full-time graphics designer who has done many commissions for homes both here and in Europe.