

# Like a river sinuous making its way

through the ancient Southwestern landscape, the creations of blacksmith and artist Christopher Thomson represent an organic evolution of form. The comparison is apt not only for the flowing lines of Thomson's hand-forged metalwork. It also reflects one of the artist's deepest sources of inspiration: the land itself, especially its textures and forms. "The mesa, the river right down there, Starvation Peak—all these things slip into the work subconsciously," this Master of the Southwest reflects while sitting in his tranquil showroom. He and his wife, artist Susan Livermore, constructed the building from an old thick-walled adobe structure on their land southeast of Santa Fe.

Nearby is the blacksmith's cavernous shop. With a packed-dirt floor, roaring furnaces, rhythmically thumping air hammer, and dozens of hand-forged tools lining the walls, it is a primal space of hard work and elemental transformation. Here, Thomson and four assistants forge steel and bronze into an impressive range of items for the home, including tables, chairs, beds, lamps, fireplace tools, candlesticks and architectural lighting. His award-winning work is sold nationwide. "If one wants sensuality, grace and originality in hand-forged ironwork, no other individual's work can compare to his," declares Santa Fe-based interior designer Jane Smith.

Thomson also creates free-form fine art in steel. A monumental work donated to the United World College near Las Vegas, N.M., was inspired by the school's Bartos Institute for the Constructive Engagement of Conflict. The 13-foot-high piece incorporates geometry and the shape of the native yucca plant to convey a feeling of unity, wholeness and hope. His most recent series of wall and table-mounted sculpture is titled *Primordial Improvisations*.

Improvisation runs through Thomson's life and work like a recurring musical riff. Raised in Maryland near the Potomac

River, he spent his final high school year at a boarding school in Colorado, where he was introduced to blacksmithing. "It impressed me as magic when I first saw metal being forged," the 58-year-old artist remembers, speaking in his characteristic thoughtful, quiet manner.

Thomson studied engineering for a time at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, but left and turned to the arts "to find an essence of our humanity." That led to studying music, creating pottery, marrying Susan, settling in New Mexico in 1979, building his own adobe home, and eventually shifting from clay to steel. Along the way, he also spent considerable time hiking and kayaking alone in places such as the Grand Canyon. And his interest in music evolved from classical to improvisational on a variety of flutes.

In producing functional or fine art pieces, Thomson allows the process and materials—the "joy and excitement of working with fire and metal"—to guide the design. There is never any forcing or grinding of steel. Instead, like free-form jazz, the fluid nature of hot metal suggests what shape it should take. "It's chance but it's not chance," the artist observes. "I'm always trying to find that improvisational freedom I find in music and bring it into my ironwork." □

**Above:** *Constructive Engagement*, a 13 1/2' high x 8' sculpture displayed on the campus of The Armand Hammer United World College of The American West in New Mexico, depicts yuccas in all stages of growth. **Opposite:** Using only traditional techniques, Thomson crafted the andirons and grate for this restored fireplace in Montezuma Castle, located on the campus of United World College. The design was inspired by a century-old lithograph of the building's lobby.

