

THREE DECADES AGO, JEFFERSON MACK
STEPPED INTO A WORKSHOP IN LONDON.
TODAY, HE REMAINS ONE OF THE FEW TRUE
BLACKSMITHS IN AMERICA. WE CALL HIM...

THE REAL

IRONMAN

JEFFERSON MACK

STORY BY LAURA CAVALUZZO
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“I GIVE PEOPLE
A 2000-YEAR
GUARANTEE.”
HE SMILES.
“JUST SAVE
YOUR RECEIPT.”



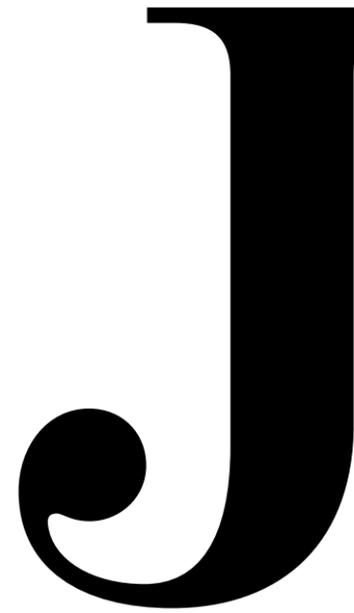
design. His door handles are sculptures that just happen to be attached to doors, his stair rails swirl into abstract vortices or overshoot the newel post to climb the wall like vines. A Jefferson Mack creation is as likely to echo the sensuality of Art Nouveau Paris as the workhorse solidity of medieval London.

His objective is to draw the eye and lead it on a journey – one that it can solve, eventually. And that’s where his experience with theater and staging comes in.

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the manufacturer, and it’s really flat and perfect and square...It’s got no *chi* in it at all. It leaves you cold. So we developed techniques to put *chi* into the material, to take it out of its manufactured form as quickly as possible. Because when you have a piece that’s got texture it displays history, like it’s had other lives. It’s like, if these pieces could talk, what a tale they would tell.”

Beyond the traditional forging techniques, Mack’s *chi*-inducing methods include hammering everything from nuts and bolts to



JEFFERSON MACK
ASKS: “YOU KNOW
WHAT *CHI* IS? IT’S
LIFE FORCE.”

There’s a different word for it in every culture, in every language. You can take a piece of metal, and by working on it, you’re actually putting *chi* into it. And that’s what we do. We put *chi* into metal. *Chi* increases its interest and its value to people, and it humanizes the material so people can have a relationship with it. So my challenge is how do I get as much *chi* as possible into the material?”

With his lean frame, shock of silver hair and tortoise-rimmed glasses, Mack looks more like an architect than a blacksmith, and it’s clear within five minutes of conversation that he’s a builder, and a philosopher, at heart. “I’ve always built things,” he says. “I started doing carpentry when I was about 15, and I’ve built a lot of houses. I can finish a wall better than most drywallers. And that’s just because it’s a process. I want to know how to do things the best way possible. I’m kind of obsessive that way.”

“Kind of” may be putting it lightly. Mack’s compulsion to put things together – to create – began in childhood, when his mother gave him nuts and bolts to play with. “I don’t think she was cheap or anything,” he says. “It wasn’t to save money on toys. She just saw my inherent need for analyzing process.”

Born in Vienna, Austria – where his father may or may not have been a secret agent – Mack grew up in western Pennsylvania, “in the same town where Jimmy Stewart was raised” (he says, in a spot-on Stewart drawl). After studying jewelry design and theater at Skidmore College in New York, he worked as a rock-and-roll lighting designer nationally,

creating on-stage drama for the likes of the B-52s and Modern English.

His first professional job as a blacksmith was in a museum south of London, where his theater training came in surprisingly handy. “The deal was that I could work on the weekends and do my own stuff because they had to provide some activity in the shop for the tourists to see,” Mack says. But I had to put on an English accent, because Americans had spent all this money to come and see an English blacksmith. So I’d say “’Ow’s yerself, and ’ow’s ’erself, and ooh lovely to see ya now.”

Eventually, like so many artists, seekers and rebels before him, he landed in San Francisco, where he lived on a houseboat in Sausalito and paid his rent by building houses. In 1990, he founded Jefferson Mack Metal.

Mack’s designs are, in many ways, the sum of his diverse experience. “I have a database in my brain – we all do – that cannot be duplicated by computer,” he explains. In Mack’s case, that database includes an innate sense of human nature and our desire to understand our surroundings – to understand how things work.

“When we can’t understand, we’re really uncomfortable. This is a problem that’s really exacerbated by the computer age because we’re over-technologized as a culture. We have to use computers 20 times a day whether we like it or not and most of us don’t really understand how they work. We’re dying for things that don’t have hidden circuitry. My work is honest work, done by hand. And it’s held together by something that makes sense. A rivet makes sense.”

It’s a philosophy that belies the beauty of Mack’s work and the wonder it inspires. As he’s putting the mind at ease, he never fails to delight the eye. His hearth collections reflect the purity of form of early 20th-century industrial



“A good, well-developed piece is like a well-crafted song, or a screenplay,” he says. “There are certain rules of creating these things that appeal to the human psyche. The way you present a concept theatrically is by stages. It’s a learning process. A beautiful thing is a beautiful thing, but a beautiful thing that is understood in layers is an educational experience.”

Merging traditional materials and unexpected forms, historical influences and modern restraint, Mack creates pieces that seem unique and yet familiar, pieces that hum with their own energy and warmth. It comes down to putting *chi* into metal. But how?

The answer, according to Mack, is with texture and form. “You get material from



dirt and debris into the red-hot metal to emboss it, and churning pieces in a giant tumbler filled with scrap metal. “One hour in my tumbler equals 50-75 years of wear,” he says.

The result is metal that looks as if it’s spent decades on the ocean floor, but with enough tempered strength to withstand generations of use. “In the long run we’re really creating heirlooms, things that are going to last,” Mack says. “I always say, for my personal work, I give people a 2000-year guarantee.” He smiles. “Just save your receipt.”

