

David Browne - Metal Design

San Diego, California

Photographs provided by JoAnne Palasi

**Featured
Artisan**

Blacksmithing

An American Artisan

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From a former career in the high-tech world, to a new career in an age-old artisan craft, David Browne of San Diego, California has undoubtedly taken the road less traveled.

David was an admirer of buildings and houses when he was younger and decided to study architecture in college. While in college, he took a few ceramics classes and subsequently changed his major from Architecture to Fine Arts with a minor in ceramics. He wasn't sure (as is common with many college students) of how he would apply his Fine Arts education, but he enjoyed working with his hands and figured that he would figure something out.

David's first job after College wasn't in fine arts, but working for a company that edited old black and white movies and made them color movies for the Turner Broadcasting Company cable TV station. I remember that this process was pretty controversial in the movie biz at the time because many people were outraged by the concept – times have changed! David enjoyed the mix of technical and artistic processes required by his high-tech career. Fortunately or unfortunately, his abilities and personality were noticed, amid the hundreds of employees working three (3) shifts, and he was moved up the ladder to a management position. Ironically, this advancement would mark the beginning of the end of David's high-tech career. David recalls, "I didn't have a career, I had a job. A career is doing something you really enjoy, a job is something else entirely."

Years in Business: 5
Size of Shop: 1500 Sq Ft
Employees: None



David takes a break from his work for a quick picture.

After colorizing black and white movies for four (4) years, David's subsequent jobs led him to other areas in the high-tech management world, further away from art. It was exciting and challenging, but there was something missing. After being removed from the creative environment, he found himself asking "How did I get here?" David explained further, "The money was great, but the work wasn't very fulfilling. I wasn't managing something creative, I was simply managing people. To use a poker term, I realized I was not "All In" at the time, and I knew it."

History repeats itself, and the booming high-tech industry and the dot(.)com bubble burst and many companies closed their doors forever, similar to the industrial giants of the early 20th century. David

found himself unemployed after investing 14 years in the digital production industry. Fortunately, he had saved enough money to take his time looking for his next career move. He began to consider some type of career that would allow him to rekindle the artistic flame that once burned inside of him. He needed to work with his hands, do something physical, something creative. He considered going back to pottery or ceramics briefly, then, he watched a craftsman forging iron on a television show. The decision was made – David wanted to be a blacksmith.

David began researching blacksmithing on the Internet, reading books, and started to volunteer at a Old Town State Park in San Diego, which has an operational historic blacksmith shop. "I watched the experienced guys and pumped everyone for information, especially Todd Caffo, the head Blacksmith at the park. He really mentored me in the beginning and got me started on

the right path." The more I learned, the more I fell in love with the craft," David said. Slowly, he began to assemble a blacksmith shop in his garage. To further his learning, he joined a couple of blacksmithing organizations which allowed him to learn techniques from talented professionals and old-timers. He was able to grow his business by collaborating with other blacksmiths in the San Diego area. They would help him with larger blacksmithing projects and he would use his computer and business experience to help them with marketing and other design work. This process allowed him to learn from other blacksmiths while working on actual projects.



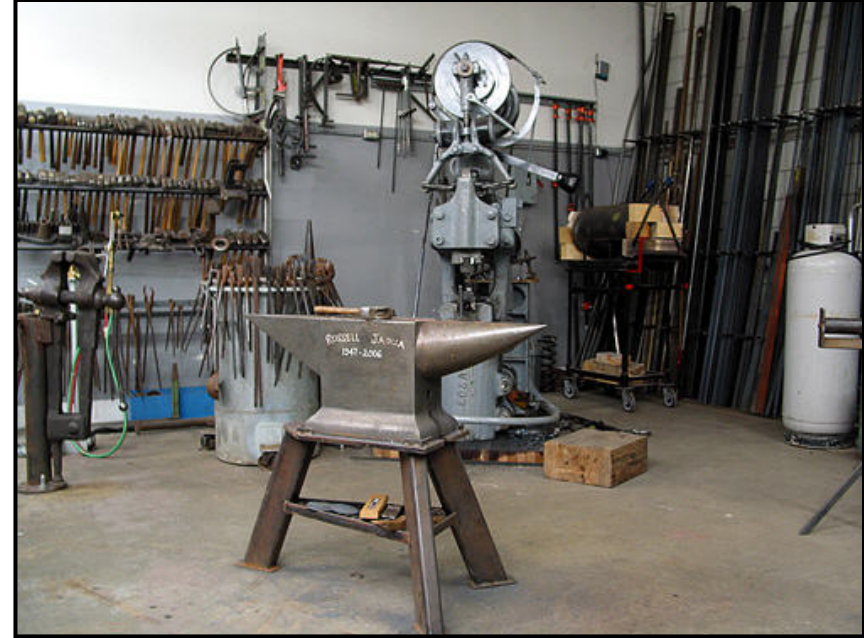
David's stylish office located in his blacksmith shop.

When asked what drew David to architectural blacksmithing, he replied, "There was a market for architectural metal work in the San Diego area, and few blacksmiths doing this kind of work. Some people think it is a compromise to work on the architectural side rather than the artistic side. I don't agree with them. I can make a living doing architectural work, and continue to explore the art side



Hank, the shop dog, poses by the palm trees.

without relying on the income. Best of all, I don't have to be a waiter to support being an artist!" Most of David's work is high-end residential commissions which he receives from the owner, or from architects and builders. David explained that you don't need a lot of customers when you are doing high-end work because the projects tend to be pretty large in scale. His challenge is to string the large projects together with the right amount of overlap to keep him busy, but not too busy. David explained, "Keeping steady work is sometimes difficult – it's a tightrope act. It is important to me that I choose my projects and clients as carefully as they would choose me. I need to be doing the right kind of work that fits my style and preference. Because I can only do so much work in a year, I want to be spending my time on projects that I can be proud of, not just something that made me money." Since most of his work comes from word of mouth from architects, builders, and interior designers, he continues to market these types of firms directly. He recommends that you make a list of the people or firms that you would like to work with and then contact them. "You can start with a letter or a postcard, but eventually you have to make some cold-calls. No one likes making the calls, but it's often nec-



David's favorite anvil and his wall of tools.

essary to get the work." David went on to explain that if you do a good job for an architect, they will do marketing for you. "If you deliver, they will keep coming back with new work," David said.

Designing ironwork for architects turns out to be more of a creative process than people think. "The architects rarely tell you exactly what they want. They have a rough idea, but they are hiring me as the expert to design the actual work," David explained. He typically draws 2 or 3 design options after meeting with the architect or client. The design drawings are as simple or as detailed as the customer needs to make a decision – they can be a simple sketch on a piece of paper or a dimensioned CAD drawing. David stated, "If you



think that you don't need to draw your designs, it will be difficult to do custom architectural work. The drawings convey the work to the client." David continued to say, "I love the design process. I like the concept of filling a bare space with something real. You have to look at the surrounding architecture and then decide what's going to look good in that space."

One of David's marketing suggestions is having a good web site (remember, he was a techie in his previous "life"). "High-end clients want to be able to look at a nice web site on their time. And having an extensive online portfolio has saved me a ton of legwork. If I'm out of the shop, I'm not making money." David recom-



A simple, yet attractive, gate design.

mends that you list your web site on your business card and hand them out to everyone. "You never know when someone will give you a call after looking at your website, and you didn't spend time marketing that person." He suggests that a web site be clean and easy to navigate. Give enough information to keep the reader interested, and provide many photos. "A great portfolio is key to the success of an artisan based business, and good photography plays a major role in accomplishing that. My wife JoAnne does all my photography and without her expertise, I would be struggling in that area."

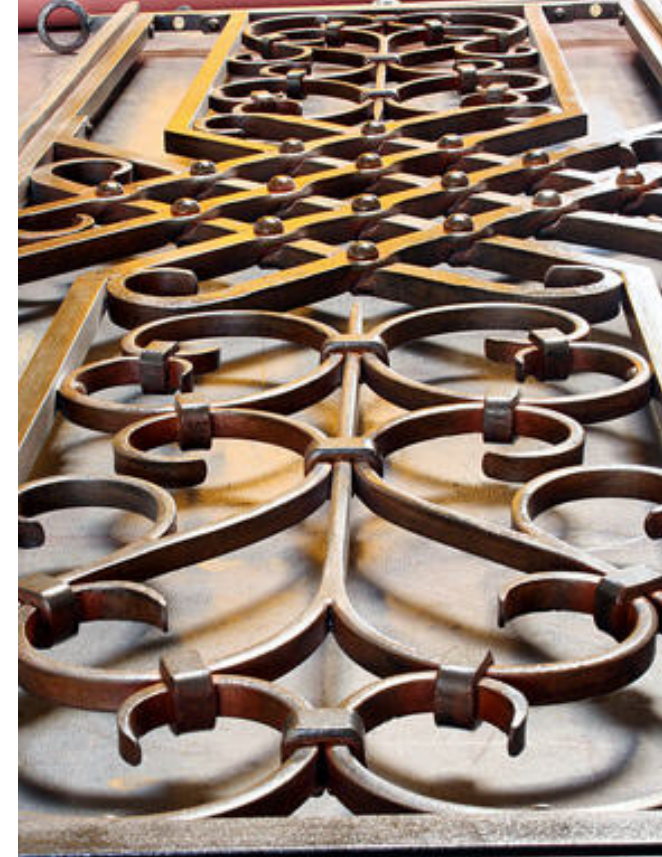
Currently, David is a one man shop. He has hired a contract bookkeeper, which he says was a great move, but he doesn't know when or if he will ever hire shop help. He is comfortable with the amount of work that he needs to bring in for himself and knows that adding employees can complicate running a business. If he does hire employees, he will look to develop some standard products that could serve to fill in the gaps between custom work. David said, "Having employees isn't really a goal, but I'm not opposed to it either. I will let the business dictate how the business grows." For now, David is content with marketing the type of work that he wants to do and he still enjoys pounding the metal himself.

When asked what he would change about the industry if he could, David responded, "The metals industry is very diverse – from art sculpture to high-end architecture. With all this diversity, I would like to see more originality. I see a lot of old designs used as a crutch, rather than taking the time to design something new and original." He does agree



that the blacksmithing industry has rebounded from near extinction. Interest in blacksmithing hit a desperate low in the 1980's, but began to gain popularity in the 1990's and has continued on an upward curve. David believes that people are overloaded with technology, and they are starting to appreciate hand made work again. "I think people have always appreciated hand work, but the world is moving so much faster now. Electronics are obsolete by the time you figure out how to use them. But something that I forge by hand will be around long after I'm gone," David said. He believes that it is the responsibility of all artisans to help show people the difference between cheap imports and actual artisan work. "Some people don't care to know the difference between cheap ironwork and good ironwork. But a lot of people do and there are more people out there that just need to be shown the differences."

As for the future, David hopes to eventually own a building rather than leasing space for his shop. He would like to have enough space to have separate shop space, a showroom, and a small office. Unfortunately, real estate in southern California is very expensive and prices continue to increase. When asked if he would consider moving out of the expensive urban area, David replied, "I like working and living in the city. In the San Diego area you have to travel a long way to get out of town. Most of my clients are here and it would be



difficult to operate the business in the same manner." For now, David will have to simply dream about owning his shop and continue to forge his new career, one exceptional piece at a time. David Browne – An American Artisan! ■