

at work



Brothers Matt and Jon White own and operate Heritage Metalworks in Guthriesville, Pa., just west of Downingtown.

BY ROGER MORRIS

# Keeping Up With



# the 'Smiths

You can't always tell a metal by its patina. At the crossroads village of Guthriesville, just west of Downingtown, Matt and Jon White run an artists' atelier that could easily be mistaken for your average neighborhood machine shop. In the main working area, air hoses snake down from the high ceiling to rows of well-lighted work benches and high-tech metal-shaping machines. The back shop is a little smaller and louder, a small gas forge casting its eerie glow as it roars near the middle of the room.

But make no mistake about what goes on in, and comes out of, the two brothers' Heritage Metalworks. For example, Matt, who by trade is a blacksmith and by self-training is an artisan who never met a material he couldn't master, took almost eight months to translate a hanging lantern

Heritage Metalworks  
melds ancient  
and modern  
techniques to create  
handcrafted designs

sketched out by French industrial design legend Matali Crasset into a \$56,000 work of art created for the Mallett Company's Meta collection, which debuted in Milan in 2008.

"It's called 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend,'" Matt White says, as he sits forward in a chair in Heritage's small, somewhat

cluttered showroom. "Out of 260 companies worldwide who were chosen to be part of the exhibit, we were the only one from the U.S.," he says. It was not a random choice by Crasset.

She was impressed, she said in an article at the time in a design magazine, by White's ability to work in computer-aided design – which he taught himself when his sketches just couldn't capture multidimensional shapes – and the company's record of working with the Smithsonian and with Winterthur, where they did restoration work on various metal historical objects.

"Matali wanted to use an alloy called paktong," White says, "which is basically a white brass that was once called a poor-man's silver and which doesn't tarnish. But it's a dirty metal that hadn't been cast in about



"Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" is Matt White's \$56,000 work of art. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MALLETT



Heritage started in restoration work, then expanded to its own accessories.



Matt White says everything is designed in house, either by sketches or by CAD.



Winterthur was one of Heritage Metalworks' earliest clients.

200 years – it's weak and brittle to work with and smokes like crazy. I had to talk with engineers and professors of metallurgy when I did my research."

In addition to making the paktong framework for the faceted-jewel design of the lantern, Heritage also cut all the glass panels for the piece, glass that was mouth-blown in Germany and shaped into sheets.

But not all of the atelier's work is destined for the showrooms of Milan or the collections of Winterthur and the Smithsonian. On a gloomy day in December, Heritage's two other blacksmiths – master craftsman Joel Mochnaly and apprentice Ian Colman – were working on an ornate iron awning destined for a home in Wilmington near the Delaware Art Museum.

Matt White, who is 37 and has the loose-limbed stance and slightly spikey hair of a rock guitarist, dropped out of college to work as an apprentice in metals, first at Franklin Mint and then at Ball & Ball. "My parents bought me my first tools, and my wife, Kim, supported us while I got started on my own. I would go out to antique shows with my son, Noah, who is now 13, on my hip, looking for work." They also have a daughter, Sophia, 9, who has her father's love of design.

He started Heritage in 2000, enlisting the help of his brother Jon, who at the time owned an interior design business. "This job certainly has its unique set of challenges," says Jon, who manages the front office.

At first, their work was mainly in restoration, with Winterthur as one of its early clients, but today the business has boomed. Heritage has its own line of accessories, such as wall sconces and other lighting fixtures, under the Maker's Mark brand, but it also retains a very rigorous custom business, working with architects and builders for one-of-a-kind gates, railings and other architectural features.

"Everything is designed in house, either by sketches or by CAD. We have a total staff of seven to eight people," Matt says. Although iron work draws a lot of attention, Heritage works with a wide range of metals – copper, brass, bronze, stainless steel, cast iron and a variety of alloys. The business process falls into fairly neat categories – design, forging and fabrication (chiefly by the blacksmiths), finishing with a variety of patinas and, with large projects, installation.

In this way, Heritage functions like an atelier, the classic European system that gathered craftsmen and artists together in a workshop-cum-studio environment presided over by artists or master craftsmen – the roles that Matt White and Mochnaly play at Heritage.

"Joel is extremely talented," Matt says of Mochnaly, who has a bachelor of fine arts degree from Penn State. "I grew up in Pittsburgh when the steel mills were still operating," Mochnaly says, "and my grandfather worked in them." The forge that



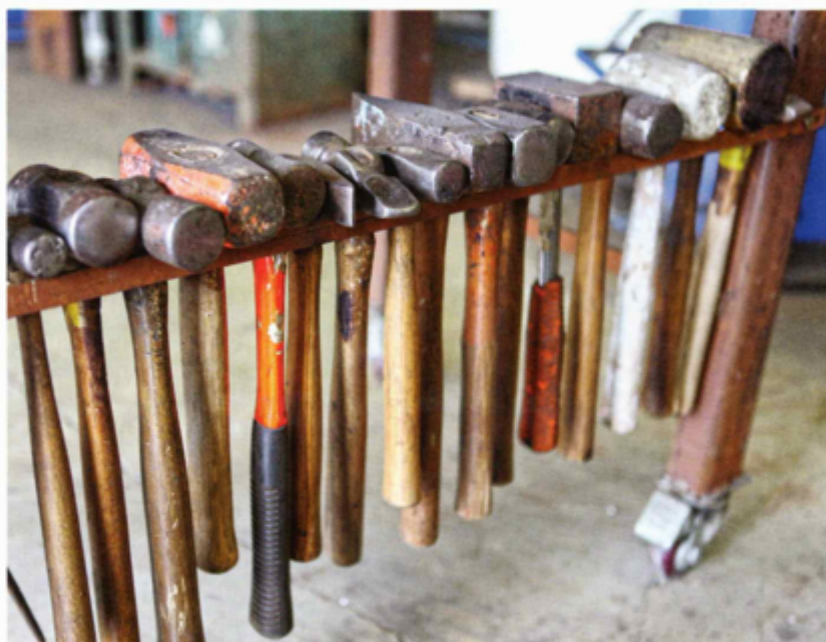
Matt White, a blacksmith, works on a custom railing at the shop.

the smiths use at Heritage is considerably smaller than those roaring furnaces – a gas-fed unit that is about the size of a motel refrigerator. “I love the variety of work here,” Mochnaly says. “One day I’m working on a master chandelier, and the next on an iron gate.”

Colman has been in metal-working for about seven years, but says, “I’m just learning blacksmithing from these guys.” He says he decided to become a smith, “when I was in college at Plattsburgh in New York and first saw a forge.”

“Like most blacksmiths, we use forges for shaping and finishing, but we also use [acetylene] torches for joining and other operations,” White says. “Metals almost have a life of their own in how they react to heat and to chemicals.”

“A lot of our craft jobs still have names, although we seldom use them – ‘brass mongers’ and ‘witches’ and ‘sorcerers’ for the people who do patinas,” White says, allowing that the somewhat eclectic chemistry of patinas is not that far from ancient alchemy. White also notes that while there are modern demands for blacksmiths, it’s difficult to find



Matt White started Heritage Metalworks in 2000, enlisting the help of his brother Jon, who at the time owned an interior design business. Today Matt works in the shop, while Jon manages the front office.

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at work



Craftsmen and artists work together at Heritage in a classic European atelier-like system.

well-trained ones.

And while restoration business is "nice work, it's hard to teach people how to do it," Matt says, plus restoration is often done in smaller shops. Custom jobs, such as entrance gates and railings, and lighting product lines are what have allowed the brothers' business to grow large and very busy. An area that particularly interests Matt White now is LED design, "because so much of our business now is lighting."

Although Matt finds himself working more with clients and doing design work, leaving much of the blacksmithing to his team, one gets the idea that he equally loves the challenge of working with his brother Jon to grow the business while looking for the artistic challenges that custom work brings to their modern-day atelier in the Chester County countryside.

#### Heritage Metalworks

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www.heritage-metalworks.com