

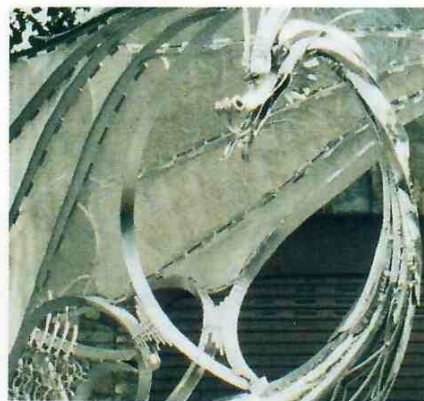
# Stainless Steel

## Simon and Antony Robinson

~Antony Robinson & Simon Robinson

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### Simon Robinson

It was always instilled in me that metal was a precious commodity. Nothing was to be wasted. It is a wonderful how even the smallest piece of metal can come in handy for something. While my father worked, I used to pick up metal off-cuts and arrange them into shapes on a fire brick. When my father's workday was done, he would weld them together for me, using the gentle flame of the oxy-acetylene torch

As a child, I was drawn to the mystery and excitement of watching my father, Antony, working at the anvil in the forge—the

sounds, the heat from the fire, the light, the smells. I was fascinated by the way the hot metal, pulled from the coals just before burning was laid upon the anvil and squashed and squeezed out under the blows of my father's hammer. What was rock hard material suddenly seemed to become like plasticine. From then on, I knew I wanted to make things in metal. I began an immediate friendship with it. I knew it and it knew me.

On my seventh birthday, I was tall enough to stand next to my father at the anvil, and he gave me my first forging lesson. He showed me how to hold the hammer,

where to stand and I put my first piece of metal into the fire. During the minutes it took for the metal to heat up to a bright yellow color, my father explained to me what I had to do. As I made my first hits, I remember wishing I had the muscles of my father to enable me to make a greater impact on the metal. Nevertheless, I had an immediate feel for the nature of hot metal. My father directed me in the basic forging operations on the piece of bar: drawing down one end to a point and fanning out the other to make a fish tail, then gently forming it into a scroll. Finally I twisted the bar to form



Dragon Gate; Stainless Steel

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a handle on what was basically a poker. It was amazing to see the hot metal twirling like a piece of licorice. I guess my informal apprenticeship began then and continued into my teens.

My father also gave me an appreciation of vintage cars, of which he had many. There were always a lot of cars from the 1920s and 1930s at our house and my work in metal extended into the large car workshop at the end of the garden. This building seemed full of old cars; a family friend stored his Riley special here too. Weekends were a hive of activity in this workshop. I think I was only six years old when, much to my mother's horror, my father gave me a Morris Minor engine and a set of spanners for my birthday.

Through watching my father making new car bodies out of aluminum sheet, I was exposed to the forming of double curvatures in this soft metal. This interest in sheet metal endured and developed into working copper, steel, and finally stainless steel sheet. In fact, working in stainless steel sheet is my favorite medium as a sculptor today.

My training took the unofficial path of apprentice journeyman master. The journeyman period began in 1984 in the Czechoslovakian studio of Alfred Habermann during the Communist regime and then with Herman Gradinger in Germany. My travels ended in 1987 when I returned to my father's forge where we collaborated for 25 years. I received my Masters Certificate from the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths, who also awarded me the Bronze Medal. In 2003, my father and I won the Tonypany Cup for outstanding work.

My father and I continued working together, sharing the studio, until our move to France in 2006, my parents to the south and myself with my wife Betsy Houlton—whom I first met when she visited our forge as a blacksmithing student—to our home and forge in Normandy.

At a time when contemporary metalwork was virtually non-existent in Britain,



Peacock Balustrade; Stainless Steel

my father's work was recognized as very innovative, and indeed one of his pieces became part of the permanent collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. *The Fire Imp* was the museum's first piece of contemporary ironwork and was hung in the museum in 1977. Marian Campbell, the V&A senior curator of metalwork declared, "*The Fire Imp*, as you know, I have always greatly admired, and felt that quite apart from its aesthetic appeal, it is truly a historic piece, in that it marks the beginning of the renaissance of blacksmithing in this country."

My father was the first artist in the world to make a pair of gates using forged stainless steel in 1981 and these stand 20 feet tall in the Great Hall of Winchester Castle. No one had ever attempted working like this before and took 16 months of punishing labour. I

remember forging out the 500 double ended scrolls from 2"x1/4" taking weeks. We worked 3/8" plate, 6"x5/8" flat and 2" round, quite hefty stuff. This project generated much excitement, even in the ranks of British Steel, who decided to donate all the material. The same was true of the renowned Swedish welding company ESAB, who also donated all the welding consumables. Many processes were discovered and developed through trial and error about how this metal behaved.

Compared to mild steel, stainless steel proved to be about three times as tough to move due to its chromium and nickel content and so required much more physical strength. More time was needed for stainless steel to heat up in the fire or with the gas torch and it cooled much more quickly, so working time was greatly reduced. Bear in mind, this was before the days when one could bring work to a laser or water cutting enterprise, even handy plasma cutters were not that readily available. Instead, we used chisels on hot metal and cutting discs in angle grinders, the little Goliath power hammer, along with a lot of sledge hammer work. The job took its toll on our tools and on us physically. But the satisfaction of discovery and triumph with the material was greatly rewarding and I wanted to exploit

this material to its fullest. It has come to a point now where I have such an affinity with stainless steel that to work with anything else feels strange.

A huge factor in working with stainless steel is the finish. The problem with most materials, but especially metals (with the exception of gold for example) is the battle to stop corrosion. They all want to go back to the earth from whence they came. Mild steel constantly presents the problem of finish. Outdoors, galvanizing helps, then one either leaves it or paints it. The choice of colors is boundless, but it somehow takes away from the essence of the metal. One can leave a rust finish but in most cases we would like our work to last forever. Stainless steel gives us the opportunity to get closer to that goal while keeping the quality of the metal.



Herein lies a problem in terms of work time. After any piece has been heated, and therefore oxidized, it has to be cleaned. This may require grinding and sanding first, depending on desired finish, but the surface must have all traces of the oxidization removed by acid treatment. This will prevent any further oxidization in most cases, but preferably, the work should be polished either by hand with buffing wheels, or by the electro-polishing process. The EP process, of course is less work for the artist, but hand polishing gives a more subtle and satisfying finish. Taking the finishing into account, one tends to design in a way that ultimately uses the least amount of heat treatment thereby shortening finish time and cost. This is not always the case, but if you are working to a budget it is an important factor to keep in mind.

I think the wonderful thing about the finished surface of stainless steel is the way it picks up the light and reflects the surrounding colors. Stainless steel also has a greater tensile strength than mild steel, allowing the use of thinner sections to achieve the same purpose. The work appears lighter and more graceful, producing artifacts with a totally different presence to any other metal. ☞



*The Music of Life; Stainless Steel*

## Antony Robinson

Dear Friends,

It took me perhaps 20 years to be able to work out why I think the way I do about my work. Naturally, it is closely linked with the way I regard this life of mine here on earth. This subject is somewhat difficult to define, as it is complex. While I admire simplicity, I highly value the beauty of complexity. This, I have come to realize, has its roots in my spiritual life.

I think of how many billions of souls God has created since Adam and Eve at the beginning of the world and how many billions of people are alive on earth at the moment, and think of the great beauty of the natural world and the creatures in it. Then I am overcome with wonder when I discover that the smallest cell contains even smaller things within it, and even the smallest bacterium has billions of smaller parts within it. I think then of the enormity of outer space and the nebulae, the stars, the impossible to imagine distances between galaxies.

Because of the grandeur of existence, I think of how insignificant my short life is, but even so God constantly extends his love for me. How can I possibly give enough love back to God? I am a very small fry when it comes down to it, but I did have something planted deep in my mind for me discover much later: my talent as an artist, as a designer, as a maker of things. He also gave me the talent of seeing and acknowledging beauty in such diverse things as the hidden harmonies of the natural world, the incomparable beauty of people, the music of the Gregorian Chant, and the classical greats: Bruckner; Mahler; Elgar with a special liking for Bach's Saint Mathew Passion.

I do find beauty in some man-made things. For me, most things made by mankind are ordinary and very often unimaginative. But every so often, something of great beauty is made by some gifted individual and, at its best, is breathtaking.

There are, however, many talented people who use their gifts for greed and self gain, at the expense of others' loss and for sheer perverseness in the design and making of more cruel ways of destruction and of the killing of people. Life is a vast resource.

Out of all this, my mind has filtered and sorted what it needs. Since I was a small boy, I have unwittingly absorbed only the information I should need as an adult. The rest was discarded intentionally or subconsciously as I grew up.

This showed up in school with average to poor grades in most subjects: Science was a no-go area; Maths incomprehensible beyond long division, and English grammar was a subject that seemed to me, now I think back on it, nothing more nor less than strange incantations that had to be learned by heart. I still have no idea what a "futurepastparticipatingsubconjunctivitis" is. You get the idea. The little I have learned I have learned from reading the best authors.

Over the years, and more so now I am approaching the last years of my seventh decade, I have become more self-contained and accept very little into my private world. My love of good music has increased, my appreciation of true beauty has increased, but the downside is that my lifelong curse of shyness has also increased out of proportion. My trust in people has suffered very much throughout my life. But I still wake up each day, and thank God for my life, hoping I can do something that day He would accept. I don't always succeed, as I have a fairly high standard of judgment on things I do. One can only try one's best. I am fortunate to be loved by wife Marie whom I have loved for 55 years, and to be loved by my children, grandchildren, great-grandson and by some very special friends. I am richly endowed.

You may be able to see why the things I have designed and made have been called beautiful. I do not use technique for its own sake, as so many do, as it gets in the way. I go to the heart of my subject, this being my attempt to reflect in some small way, God's creation. This in itself is a humbling experience.

In my graphic work, I have for some years composed pictures that are small exercises in perspective. Ever since my late father, a teacher and an artist in his own right, taught me as a young boy how to see it, perspective has fascinated me. Think on this: God "invented" perspective so that we could observe his creation and not be frightened by it. The sun, moon and stars are man-sized aren't they? We can make anything outside of ourselves as large or as small as we want to see it. Amazing. My pictures all tell the same story, that of the journey through life here on earth towards our own particular destiny.

Antony Robinson

14 March 2013

Caux, France ☞