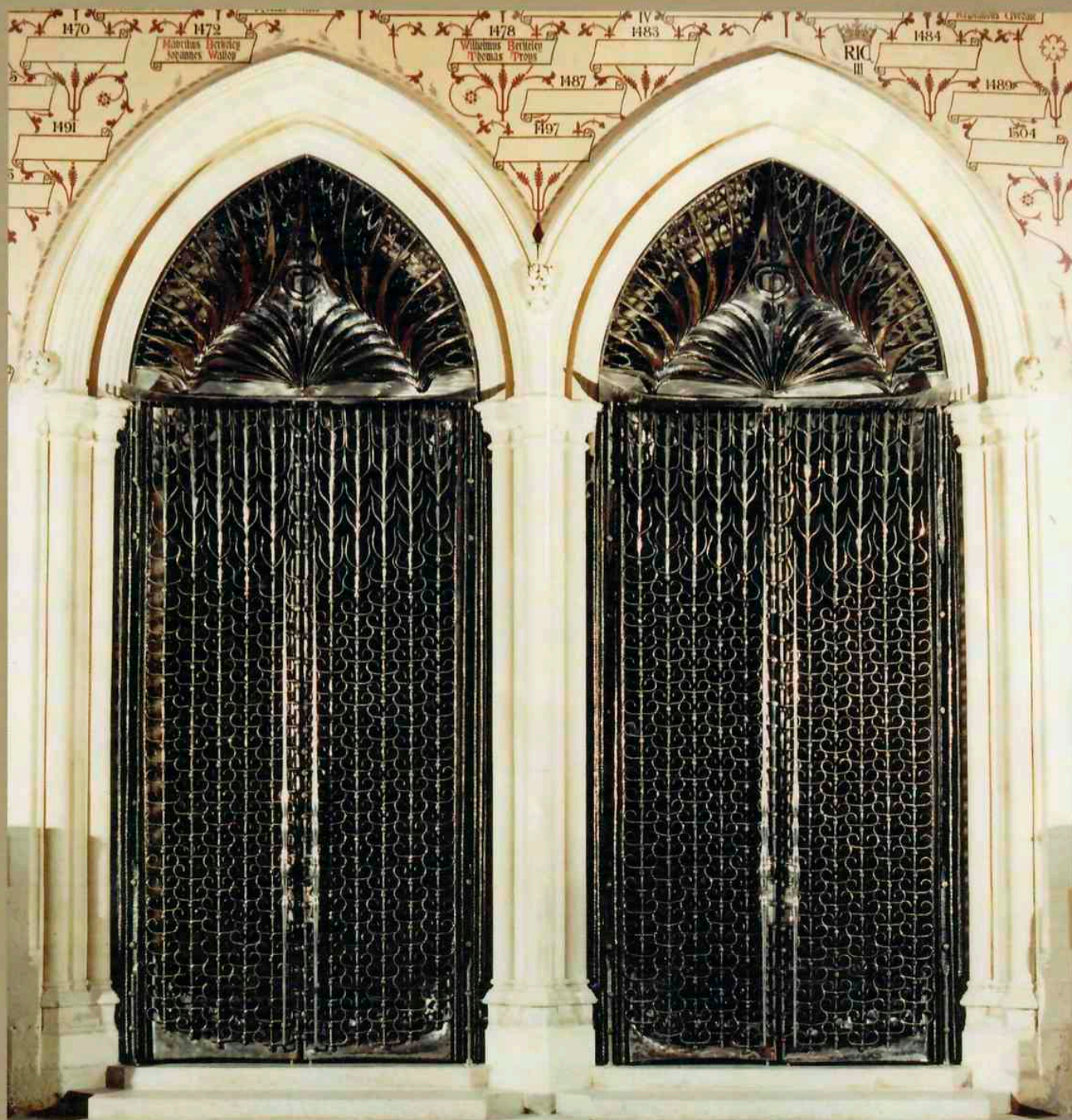


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HOW DESIGN HAPPENS

Overlapping Worlds: An Introduction to

Antony Robinson

(Part One of a Two Part Series)



By Betsy Houlton Robinson
Caligny, Normandy /France

Photos by Simon Robinson and Betsy Houlton Robinson

The gates of heaven are said each to be carved from a single pearl. Such a glorious notion is the kind that finds its way easily into conversation with master blacksmith, Antony Robinson. After a short while in his company one begins to imagine that gates of such luminous splendor could have come from his workshop.

As the ever-present pencil swirls (perhaps working out the Wonderland-like adjustment in scale of pearl to human soul) and topics roll from stainless steel, design, and his passion for early vintage cars, something becomes very clear. Tony Robinson's foundation is his Roman Catholic faith, and it is the source from which the dynamism in his work springs.

"The spiritual world," he says, "is a vast universe of its own of which we know very little, naturally, I suppose. It is an infinitely greater and stronger world than this one."

Among the dazzlingly gorgeous designs in forged and highly-polished stainless steel (which have become the hallmark of the work made by Tony and his son Simon in their Shropshire forge for more than 30 years), much has been for the Church. Indeed, the physical qualities of polished stainless seem a natural (if far too uncommon) match for a sacred setting.

Above: Antony (left) and Simon Robinson

*Opposite page: Auferstehung. (Rising up)
Height: 30'. Stainless steel
Pickled and sanded finish.*

My conversation with Antony Robinson began in the autumn of 2003 when I, a self-described apprentice-pilgrim cum hobo, sought him out for help on an ecclesiastical commission. That summer, while visiting the ancient Abbey of San Vincenzo in the mountainous region of Molise, Italy, the Reverend Mother had asked me to design a monastic grille for their church; a sparsely beautiful structure in the Romanesque style. This would replace a pre-existing earlier grille which she had removed saying it was *"too prisonlike"*.

The monastic grille, like much religious metalwork, fills a practical as well as a spiritual need. Historically for example, the first grille of San Vincenzo, would have stood to protect the community of monks, while also symbolically uniting the community as an enclosed order and setting them apart physically from the outside world. The modern grille would call for an easier softer feel, as one nun put it *"analogous to a cell's semi-permeable membrane that selectively allows molecules to pass in or out for the life of the organism."*

My apprenticeship had in fact begun at the blacksmith shop of an enclosed abbey in Bethlehem CT, where I had a hand in making the monastic grille for their church, so I was not totally green. (On that job I held the cinematic title of "the drifter" -drifting out the hundreds of holes in the horizontal flat bars allowing the round verticals to pass through; a design feature which was a lovely expression of the interpretation of the grille as something "semipermeable".)

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I was thrilled to be offered the chance to work on another grille, yet knew it was beyond my capabilities in many ways.

Help would be needed from someone who could guide me technically, yet who would also appreciate the symbolic importance of the monastic grille to the communal life of an enclosed monastic order. (The blacksmith under whom I had worked in Connecticut had since become a monk, so he was no longer available!) Where would I find such help?

While looking through a metalwork publication, I came across a black and white photo; a magnificent double pair of shining gates that spanned the opening of a great hall, like an image from an Arthurian legend.

Reflective surfaces seemed to carry me off on undulating ribbons of light, drawing my eye upward along passageways of glinting arcs, these then transitioning from one into another as they rose. I was enthralled. Assuming these gates to be ecclesiastical in nature, I referred to them as "The Resurrection Gates", and vowed, with the urgency of a knight on a quest, to find their maker, Antony Robinson!

They were of course the great Winchester Castle Gates and Transom Grilles, (shown on the cover and page 18) and no work could better capture the qualities of this most demanding material, forged and polished *stainless steel*. Not in fact ecclesiastical, they were commissioned in 1981 as a royal wedding gift to Prince Charles and Lady Diana by the Hampshire County Council.

Below: Abbey of Regina Laudis Monastic Grille. Designed by Jeffrey Havill and RM Praxèdes Baxter. 14' x 60'. Mild steel, copper, and bronze. Gun black patina, and beeswax.



Right: Hall Door Screen. 7' x 9'. 316 stainless steel. Electropolished finish.

Below right: Detail from Waterspill, showing the Robinson trademark button welds. (See page 21 for full view.)

These gates boast genuine “first ever” status: the world’s first-ever forged stainless steel gates, and mark not only a milestone in metalwork design, but also in the stainless steel industry. (Described more fully in the following design memoir by Antony Robinson.)

Already in England, I was staying at the Somerset home of artist blacksmith Denise Axelsen and her husband Martyn. Denise had invited me to spend a couple of months helping in her forge making things for the upcoming Christmas fair season. Denise was a big “Tony fan”.

Through the kind efforts of Richard Quinnell, the founding director of The British Artists Blacksmith Association (BABA), I was able to meet and to stay for two weeks with Tony and his wife, Marie, in Shropshire, and also their son Simon, (Tony’s “secret weapon” whom I had not known even existed, and who would later become my husband).

During that time, I felt Tony imparted treasures to me: insights about design and faith, and how spirituality gives rise even to actual shapes. It was beyond my capacity to absorb it all on one sitting. Thus, I am so happy I tape recorded our conversations as they unraveled every evening around the dining room table which, as the days passed, became covered with drawings.

Drawings related to my concept for the San Vincenzo grille became more specified with the passing of days. For the fountain motif, we decided to use stainless steel round bar, cold bent in overlapping parabolic arches. Then came dimensions, scale drawings, side and plan views. Work samples were produced in the workshop during the day; cut-off bundles of stainless bar dotted together with the shining Robinson trademark button weld; a structural as well as decorative weld often used to join round bars that are side by side.

The stainless was beautiful - perfect for describing the qualities of a fountain, and would enhance the sparse interior of this Romanesque architecture.

I couldn’t believe that prior to meeting Tony and Simon, I had no idea this material could be taken beyond cutlery and kitchen appliances.

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Midway through week-two with Tony, the conversation struck a deeper note as we began plans for what was probably the most important part of our design: the Communion Gate. This is a waist-high central grille opening through which the priest offers the Holy Eucharist to the monastic community, which is the essential experience of their faith.

Tony drew with a wizard's finesse. His pencil came alive in sweeps and arrows indicating currents and velocity of air pull. I was about to learn how the communion gate, this tightly-defined physical place where an event of such infinite power occurs, could best be understood by what I saw when he pulled back his hand. He explained with the humility of a workman illustrating lofty concepts with the aid of something familiar: a fireplace...complete with a cut-away to the chimney inside.

From one of my tape recordings, Tony explained:

Physically, the venturi is the narrowing of an air passage. The air entering the wide end at a certain speed, increases its speed tremendously as it goes through the narrow part of the venturi, and then spreads out on the other side. This increasing speed and concentration of the previous volume of air into a small space, becomes an analogy for the coming of Christ, and the amount of energy stored at that point is incredible.

I was hooked. This venturi is a symbol for Christ coming and concentrating everything in the world that is mankind and God's creation into one point, and then opening his arms on the cross and dying, offering up his life. Tony continued:

I've often thought of Christ's coming to Earth and the shape of the world's history as the form of an open-ended hourglass. All the world's history before Christ came, in one end of the hourglass got sucked into the venturi, the narrow neck of the hourglass or the time of Christ's birth, life and death, and then from that time on, it spread out again on the other end as it were.

During that time with Tony I learned to see overlapping worlds: the eternal with the momentary and the "theology" of a chimney; the venturi point and the shape of the world's history as an open-ended hourglass.

To use the analogy of viewing myself as a piece of metal, I had undergone a profound transition in the forge of Tony's formation. I was re-shaped and changed forever.



Left: Antony at the Deauville Film Festival, 2014

Below: Antony and Marie Fontas, France, 2015

Below left: Simon and Betsy, Art Student's League, Sparkhill, NY campus.

Below right: Betsy Houlton Robinson, 2016



What became of the grille? Funds for its construction, which were to come from UNESCO, were "mysteriously redirected". We were told the project was floored, due to the discovery of foundational cracks caused by earlier earthquake damage.

It didn't really matter though; the structures of this world are not the ones that really hold. As Tony taught me, "God's love encompasses every single atom of creation and it is reassuring to know there is something you can hang onto; something solid".

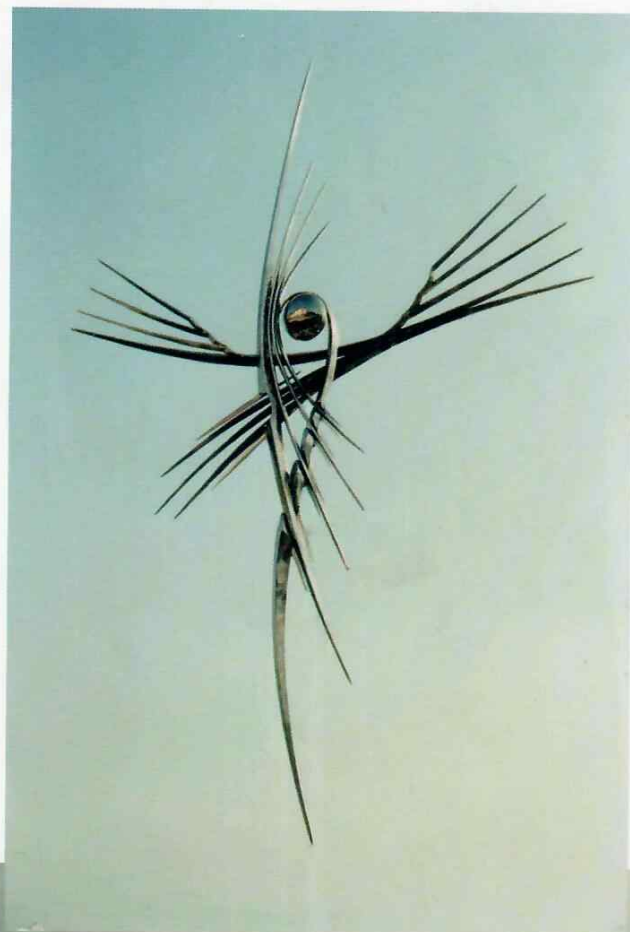
• Antony Robinson is now retired, and lives with his wife Marie in the south of France. He no longer operates a studio. Although retired, this has not stopped him from making a stupendous project.

• Betsy Houlton Robinson is a freelance writer and apprentice blacksmith. She has written for the New York Daily News, and as apprentice, served as part of James Horrobin's team on the Winston Churchill Memorial Gates for St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Betsy is married to Antony's son, Simon Robinson. They reside with their son, William, in Normandy, France.



Left:
Uxbridge Crucifix.
 Forged mild steel
 Height: 6'
 Wax finish.

Right:
Friedrichshafen
Crucifix.
 Stainless steel
 Height: 14'
 Hand polished.



Right: *Bristol Boat.*
 Length: 10"
 Polished stainless
 steel.



The Gates and Transom Grilles The Great Hall, Winchester Castle

By Antony Robinson

I will endeavor to describe in greater detail the process of the inspirational thought in this my best work.

In 1953, I toured England on my racing bicycle as a member of the Youth Hostels Association of Australia. (Our family had emigrated from England in 1948 and I finally returned to my homeland in 1960.) I visited the one-time capital city, Winchester, and visited the Great Hall, the only remaining part of the 13th Century castle. Inside, on the West Wall, I saw the round table purported to be that of King Arthur and his twelve knights. Of course it's a fake. On the East Wall are lettered the names of the kings of England with an interconnecting series of branches and trident leaf forms. These cover the wall and surround the two Gothic arched gateways in the centre. In 1958, these were closed off. I marveled at the proportions of the Hall, they being that of the double square.

I left the Hall and visited the Cathedral. Unbeknownst to me, however, was the fact that the designs of the medieval ironwork, particularly the scroll forms of St. Swithun's Grille* in the Cathedral, had tucked themselves deep within my subconscious.

It wasn't until 1964 that my life changed for the better and I learnt what an anvil was. (It is quite a sophisticated lump, designed in medieval times, and I say now to students; *"Don't forget the anvil is actually a multi tool. It's got all sorts of shapes, and you can do all sorts of things with it."*)

Opposite page: Winchester Gates and Transom Grilles. 8' x 20'. Stainless steel, and hand polished.

Right: Detail, Winchester Gates and Transom Grilles.

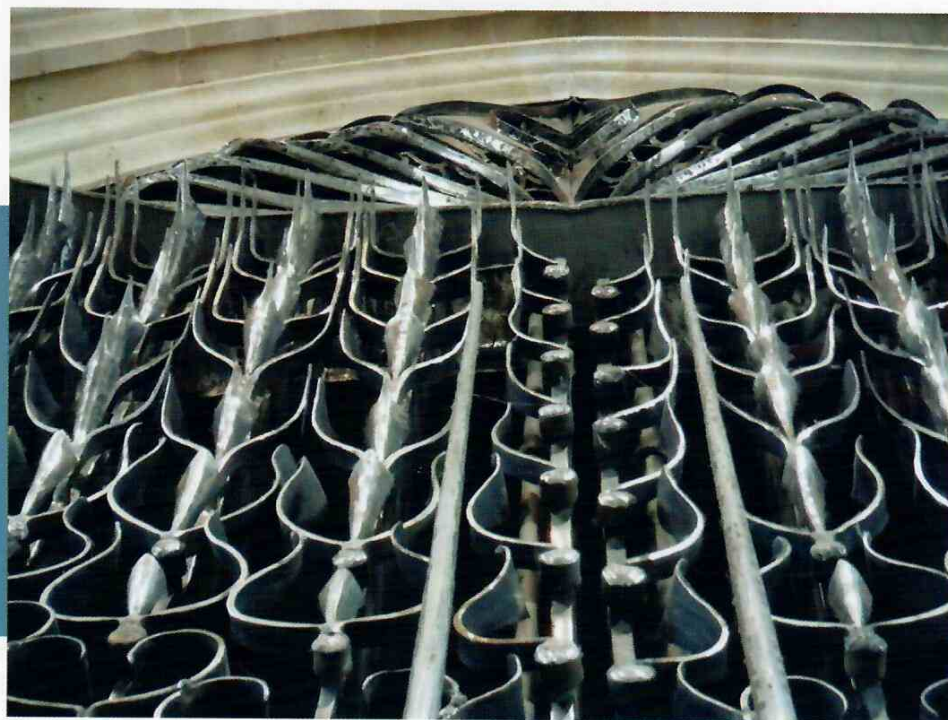
Nearly two decades later, when Hampshire County Council announced a competition to design gates for the Great Hall of Winchester castle as a wedding present to Prince Charles and Lady Diana, the memory of the east wall and the 12th Century St. Swithun's Grille sprang vividly into the foreground. I knew that was it!

If you look at the St. Swithun's Grille it has vertical stems, and it is literally filled with scrolls. And nothing else. This was the starting point of my design, and became partner to the trident leaf forms as seen in the family tree motifs.

The development of the scrolls into the tridents was the breakthrough in designing the transition of one form rising into the other. This upsweep resolved itself in the initials and date in the grilles: CD 1981 (i.e., Charles and Diana 1981) specified in the design brief.

Also specified, these gates had to be incredibly strong, as they were to be security grilles to the adjoining Law Courts. (This was still the time of IRA terrorist trials, some of which took place here). For security reasons, the design brief also stipulated a maximum aperture size of 2½" at the lower level, and a maximum of 4" at the upper. In addition, there had to be a top horizontal bar, and therefore the gates could not be arched, calling for a separate transom grille.

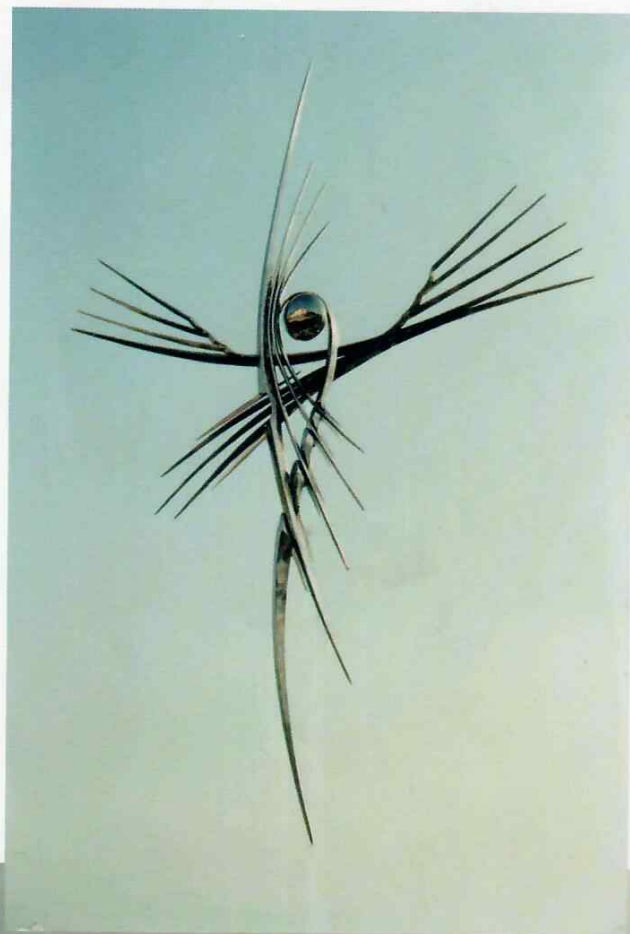
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Quinnell Reflects Robinson

Dick Quinnell, founder of the British Artist Blacksmith Association (BABA) contributed the following reflection on Tony Robinson's design for the Gates to the Great Hall, Winchester Castle.

When we saw Tony's winning design it was clear that he had pulled out all the stops – choosing stainless steel as the material was by itself extraordinarily daring – almost certainly guaranteeing a loss on the job through the sheer cost of material and extra time needed to work it alone – but the design was also extraordinarily daring – taking the client's brief requiring density, and interpreting it in the gates as a mass of forged motifs like a great flock of winged beings - birds or angels - rising up into the sky, surmounted by fixed tympani each with a fan of motifs like sails or wings.

The gates were triumphantly realized; the very best acknowledgement of Tony's achievement was from his peers: A couple of weeks before the official dedication, a hundred or so blacksmiths from Britain and overseas who were attending BABA's 1983 conference at Farnham College of Art about two weeks before the official opening of the gates, were taken in two bus loads to the Hall in the evening. We filed into the Great Hall in almost total darkness, were pushed and jostled into place and told which way to face – towards Tony's voice - and then Tony called for silence, pressed a switch, and very, very slowly the floodlights came up, like a rosy sunrise, and revealed the gates in all their gleaming glory. A stunned silence – and then applause, that went on and on. Genuine, heartfelt, spontaneous recognition of an utter masterpiece, from an expert audience, who knew exactly what they were seeing.

The gates will endure, as a wonder, perhaps for millennia.

DQ February 2017 

Below: section from St. Swithun's Grille. (From page 119 of Wrought Iron in Architecture, by Gerald K. Geerlings.)



Above: Waterspill. 42" x 20'. 316 stainless steel. Electropolished finish.