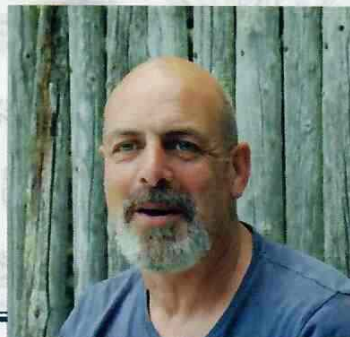

HOW DESIGN HAPPENS

Part Two: Developing a Personal Style.

By Simon Robinson

Caligney, Normandy/ France

Photos by Simon Robinson, and Betsy Houlton Robinson



Left: Simon Robinson

When designing and making things in metal, you are basically producing items that are for the living space; either inside or out, public or private. One aspect is embellishing architecture. One is decorating.

To begin, one has to know how to draw competently. In your mind, you must have a reasonably full knowledge of architectural styles, their influences, plus everything that went into them from tapestry, ceramics, glass, woodwork, painting...in fact all of the crafts that produced the whole ensemble.

When designing for any site or period, one must also have a good sense of proportion. How large or small is each component in relation to one another? How good is that curve... really? Does the whole work balance? This sense of proportion comes with experience from absorbing into oneself all well-proportioned architecture, metalwork and artifacts down through the ages.

Design within the capabilities of your workshop. Unless you land a good five to six figure commission, (where it is economically feasible to make or buy extra tooling or build a bigger space), design within the capacity of your workshop and tools.

My father and I have always worked with a very limited amount of equipment: a fire, a couple of anvils, a handful of hammers and tongs, a couple of welders and grinders, a pillar drill and band saw, and about four to five leg vices. That is about it, yet one can make a vast amount of things using very little, apart from a lot of ingenuity and know how.

Back in '86 at a conference in Aachen, Germany, a lesson was learnt for many. A smith from Togo was demonstrating using a small coconut charcoal fire on the ground, with a wind source from two goatskin bellows.

Using part of a ship's prop shaft buried end-on in the ground as an anvil, and a lump of metal for a hammer (all-be-it expertly shaped), he deftly fashioned two halves of a large bell from some plate, then fire welded the two halves together. No vast array of tools, no electricity; nothing. A lesson indeed.

Many metal workers have a problem coming up with a really good design for a modern building. In particular the designer faces difficulties in finding a starting point in the design process within a landscape that is largely devoid of decorative elements.

In today's "style", there are minimal architectural elements to latch onto. We can look back to Roman mosaics and "ooh and aah" at the Greeks before them, or Venice and Barcelona with their beautifully decorated buildings.

Throughout history, man has always decorated his buildings, from prehistoric cave paintings to Art Deco in the '20's and '30's. All epochs have their own distinctive style and school of thought. However, during and after WWII, with austerity in Europe going into the 1960's and technological advancements in America and emphasis on efficiency, housing and furniture was of a very utilitarian style. In Europe, with no money to spend on "needless decoration", buildings were without any aesthetic architectural sense. Metalwork, if there was any, had to be dirt-cheap. Of course this was pretty much the end of the road for a distinctive decorative style. Try to name a school of thought, movement, or decorative style of architecture with any significance since WWII other than Brutalism.

Significant modern architecture generally uses a steel structure with glass walls. It seems there is no room for decorative metalwork. But we must work with what we have, and incorporate at least an element of something within the building or grounds, perhaps using the history of its owners or vicinity.

So, how does one develop a personal style? This comes from personal preference of art and design throughout the ages, not only in metalwork but also in architecture, the fine arts, interior design, etc.

If designing for architecture of a specific period, one respects the fashion of its time, and the metalwork duly reflects that era. It need not, nor should it be a replica work of the time, but it certainly should hint to it. One constantly innovates, seeks new ideas, and proposes more difficult challenges to push boundaries in one's design.

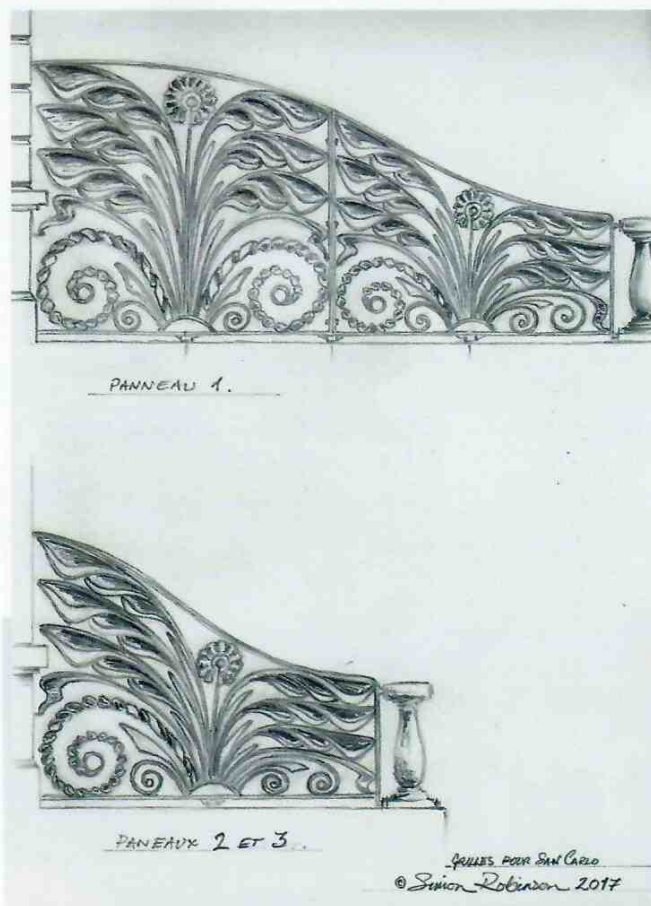
With a sound knowledge in the history of the arts and crafts and a full understanding and appreciation of the history of metalworking (perhaps using favored works stored in the memory), one gradually starts to develop a style of one's own. This is reinforced and helped by life experiences, emotions, and personal philosophies. It takes time to mature and the development process continues throughout one's life.

A simple example of my design process: Chateau de San Carlo, Villers-sur-Mer, France. This project presented design challenges often associated with old properties:

- Working within the confines of a reasonable budget.
- Relating a new design to existing period metalwork.
- Accommodating a change in use from a single residence into multiple apartments.

The client is a syndicate of 12 co-owners of the residence, which is divided into twelve apartments. The architecture is of a grandiose "Neo-Gothic" (think *The Addams Family*?) style popular with the wealthy in the mid-to-late 1800's on the northwest Riviera of France (Cabourg, Deauville, etc.), and also Biarritz in the Southwest. Typically, it has a terrace at the rear with two sweeping stone staircases to the lawns. There are four apartments on the terrace/ground floor and the clients want three grille panels to divide the terrace between the four apartments. As the terrace bows outwards in the center between the two staircases, the middle grille extends twelve feet, while the two end grilles are eight feet long.

I was asked to design three concepts; at least two being contemporary. The height at the house wall had to be about six feet and finish at the stone balustrade at the outer edge of the terrace, which is only 32" high.



Above: Saint Carlo Grille Design: Chateau de San Carlo, Villers-sur-Mer, France. This design is the focus of the section of the article, a simple example of my design process. Mild steel. 72" sloping down to 32" x 144" (central panel; 96" end panels)

The problem with dropping the height down was that it presented a curved top line that was not present in the original architecture or ironwork, and this sat uncomfortably with me. In the end I had to accept it as this was in the brief. This meant that I could mentally break away from being too close to the original ironwork.

I took photos of architectural details and of the existing original ironwork: balconies, window grilles and a stair balustrade all of which is very decorative and open, using cast iron elements as well as hand forged components. All pieces are screwed together rather than forge welded, and all the panels use floral motifs. From the terrace beyond the lawn there is a view of the small town and the sea meeting the curve of the beach.

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Above and left detail:

The Annunciation.

I was commissioned by the Carmelite Center in Dublin to make a life-size sculpture of the Annunciation. I chose the moment when the Archangel Gabriel first appears, although he is not in this piece. Mary is reading and looks up as she senses something is happening. The three drapes with rays signifies God viewing with anticipation the forthcoming event. Just to let you know, repoussé in stainless steel sheet takes quite a bit of work.

Stainless steel. Height: 4'6".

Right: *Corpus: St. Mary-le-Bow Church, London. This was made from one piece of stainless steel sheet 2.5mm thick with the crown of thorns and nails added on. There is no face so that each viewer can, with their own imagination, have a picture of Our Lord. The ripped and open front of the body brings to mind the suffering of Christ's passion. Stainless steel. Height.: 5'*

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Generally, I do not like to do more than one design for a project, as this takes more creative thinking time, but often the client wants a choice because they have no idea what they want and it is a way of identifying their preference from which one can narrow-down a final design.

I first put down an idea which is very formal using elements from the existing metalwork, but in a simplified way and one which could incorporate the downward sweep in height. It would be virtually impossible aesthetically to reproduce the original ironwork within this framework. Plus, the client had expressed they would not meet the vast expense in reproducing the original work. I must also say that a budget was not forthcoming, as is very often the case. Therefore, one has to make an educated guess on how much the client is able to afford, and design within that figure. (I still find that I guess a higher figure than the customer is willing to pay!)

My second design is inspired by the sea view. I go away from anything to do with the house, and focus solely on the view. The wave theme is fine but I know deep down that it is not for this property. Even so, it is a way of narrowing down what the client likes or doesn't like.

So on to my third idea, and the one that I spent the most time developing. My thought process goes something like this: I see the property; it is quirky yet very bold and imposing. The metalwork must stand up to that. I know the story of the original owner who built a sister chateau in Argentina, hence the name, San Carlo.



I am thinking of the well-to-do Parisians coming on those early steam trains to the coast seeking the sea air, and perhaps dreaming of warm climes. I'm thinking palms and banana plants.

In my mind, this leads to the words "Jardin des Plantes", with its lush foliage. I have to go away from the traditional yet have some tie to the era. In the original ironwork, there is a repeated flower motif, plus three-lobed leaves and the ever-present scrollwork. I latch onto these as my starting point. I develop a top line which sweeps from high to low, and I know that the main design concept is going to be plant life.

I work on the plants within the space, starting with the main stem and flow with the leaves on each side. At the bottom, the leaves are not developed, as if waiting to unfurl. I bring in a large scroll to occupy the space in the bottom third of the panel. Using plain flat or square bar would look too thin and weak against the large leaf forms. So to bulk out, I twist the flat bar, scroll it and *ta-da!*...I have virtually filled the space without lots of fussy lines.

Incidentally, I was doing a lot of drilling, and I guess my brain was full of swarf. Thus the large two-foot D&S (drill and swarf) scroll was born. "Hang on" you say! "They're ram's horn scrolls!" Maybe so, but when I put them down, they're "D&S scrolls". (Continued on page 42)



Right: Floor Lamp.

This was the second of two floor lamps, the first being for my wife Betsy. The design was to have a 1950's Italian look to it, yet be contemporary. The shade can be loosened with fancy wing-nuts and used as an up-light or down-light. Stainless steel. Height: 5'6"

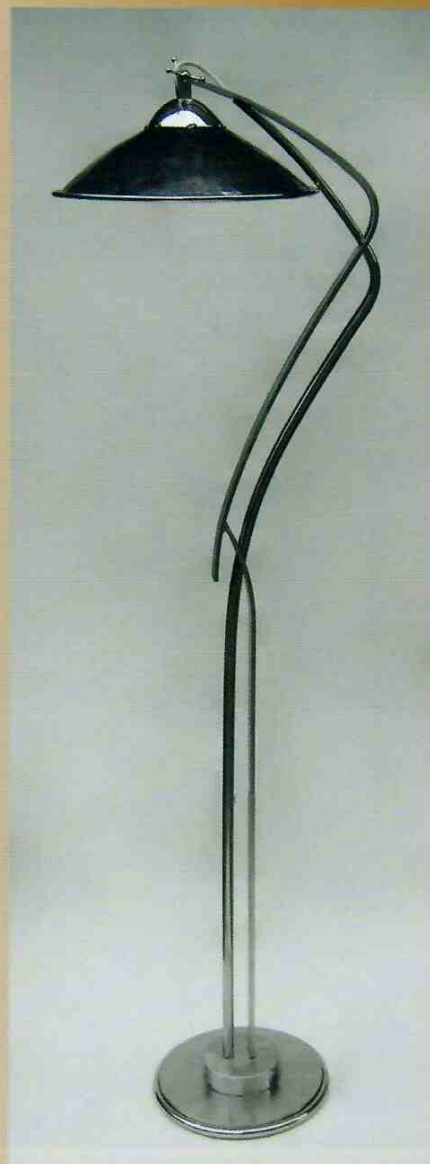
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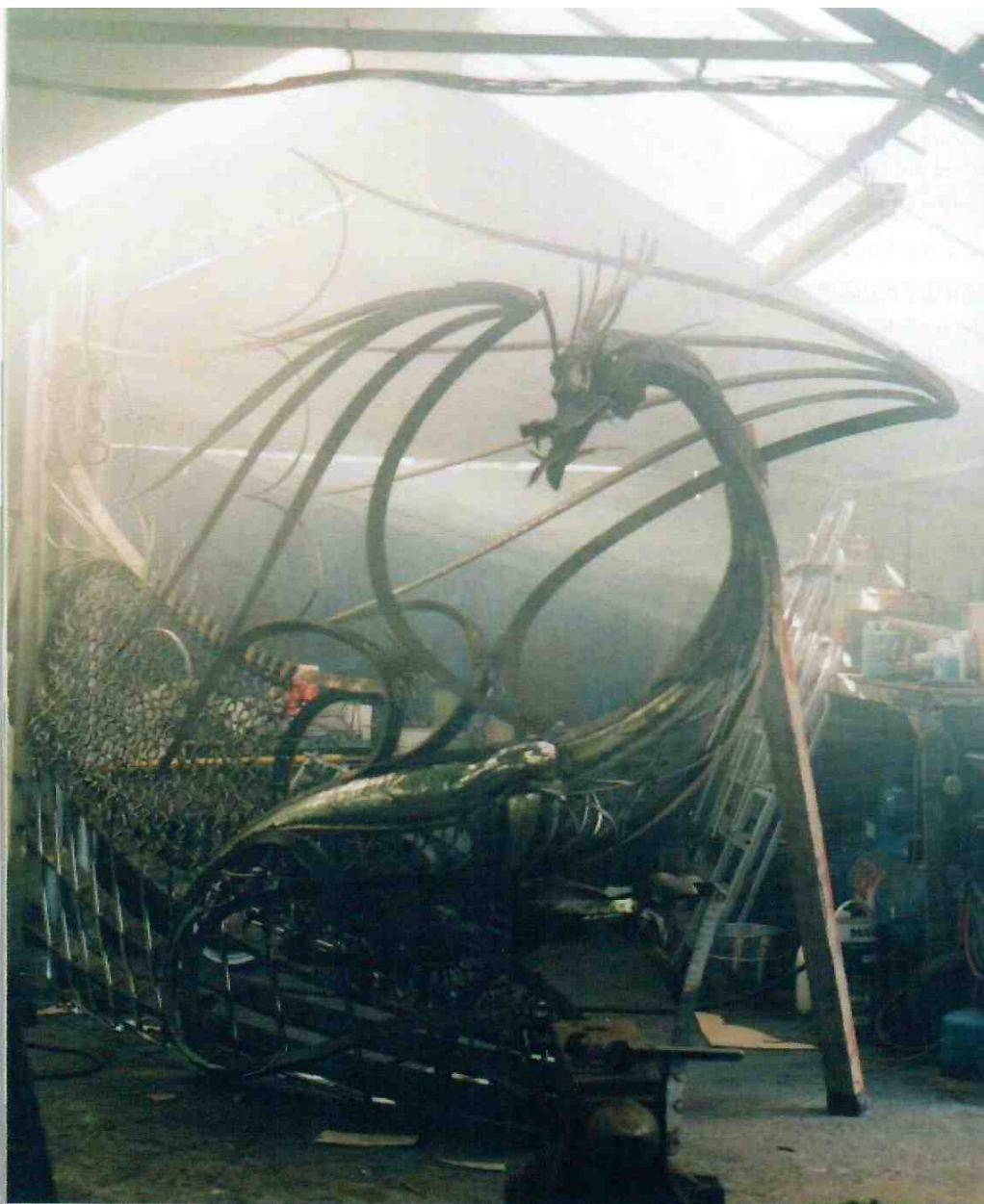
Table Lamp.

Stainless steel. Height. 18"

Below right: Fireplace.

This fireplace was made for a room that had been done in the 1920's, (now under renovation) so there is a strong influence of the hint of the Art Deco Style in its lines and details. I've used two different techniques within the design, the first being from the medieval period of stamping the flower motifs on the dogs and long-stemmed side flowers; and Filigree work on the large flowers spanning the mantel. Stainless steel. 3'6" x 5'.





Left: Dragon Gate. A view not often seen of the dragon gate under construction, emerging in smoke after lighting the forge.



Of course you should know how to make it; this should be running in your mind alongside your drawing process. It is all very good to make fancy drawings, but you “gotta know how to make it!”

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There are other spaces which are too open, and I fill them with intermediary spike leaves which contrast with the large leaves. With another nod to the original metalwork, I added two small scrolls at the bottom.

The curved base of the plant gives visual lift. If all the stems were welded to the bottom rail, it would reduce the design to a bland and lifeless state. This is an example of how such a very small line in the design can make or break the whole piece. Functionally, the curved base also allows a space between each element to allow water runoff.

Most of the time I have a picture in my head of the original ironwork and house running like a little movie. This keeps me from going too wild and scaring the client with a design that is totally wacky.

An example of failure to do that was at a very important design competition in London for a commission with a very substantial budget. The young student who won, when asked how he was going to make it, confessed he did not know, and so lost the job.

This story goes on and contains another important lesson: the importance of good presentation of designs. The runner-up designer presented his proposal via his laptop, only to have his computer crash during the presentation, and lost all his work! The third runner-up was called, who presented beautiful designs on paper with full knowledge of how to make it, and the ability to explain the process to the clients. No surprise; *he* got the job.

Suffice to say, I do know exactly how I will make the grille panels, and what materials I will use.



Quite a bit of it will be forged. It will all be electric welded; no fire welding; I know that the client hasn't the money for fancy joints. I keep in mind the time each operation will take, so when considering joinery (for example), everything has to be taken into account: the cost of the coal vs. MIG, wire, welding rods, and gas; time it takes to do it, etc. If you were to take the time to do everything by traditional method (mortis and tenon joints, fire welding, etc.), it would end up costing a fortune. Plus, it wouldn't necessarily add to the overall beauty of the piece.

I am of the mind that if those metalworkers in the Middle Ages (or whenever), had electric welders, grinders, plasma cutters et al, they would have been using them and not faffing around making what are basically wood joints! They had to use what they had at the time. Anyway that is just me, and hey...I am trying to make a living here you know!

So, my sketches are finalized, and I re-draw the design to scale on good quality paper; not just A4 (letter size) computer paper, and then cross my fingers. In this case, I showed the clients and the architect the designs, and they loved all of them, but chose without hesitation the one I had seriously put my mind to.

Later, I was thinking about why I thought of Jardin des Plantes. This is the botanical garden in Paris, and as since we live in Normandy, we often go to Paris. The design reminded me of the painter, Henri Rousseau, who used to go to the Jardin des Plantes to paint the tropical plants there, which became the setting for his jungle paintings.

Needless to say, I am always influenced by what I see, and what is going on in my life. I wasn't thinking of Henri Rousseau or the Jardin when I was drawing it. It wasn't until afterwards that I noticed the design had the same lushness and I thought it could well have been something from there. A couple of days later, I glanced at the drawing and it made me think of wallpaper. As it happens, three or four months prior, I had been to a wallpaper exhibition at the Musée d'Arts Decoratifs in Paris.

So, it is safe to say you have to make the effort to visit museums, look at books, and take in everything around you. You cannot expect to design from out of a vacuum. ■



Top: Peacock Newell. The site was a raised walkway and required balustrade along its entire length, some 60 feet. There are stone steps at each end, requiring a hand-rail. The peacocks act both as a newell post and a hand-rail. Behind is a weeping walnut tree, which when in leaf is vaguely reminiscent of a peacock trailing its tailfeathers. Lighting had to be designed for each end, and the "oil lamp" bases housed the electrical gubbins. Stainless steel. Height: 11'

Above: Tattoo Gun. Not everything has to be big. I had to make a tattoo gun as a "Celtic dragon". All the parts were tiny and had to be fully functional. Stainless steel. Height: 2"

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