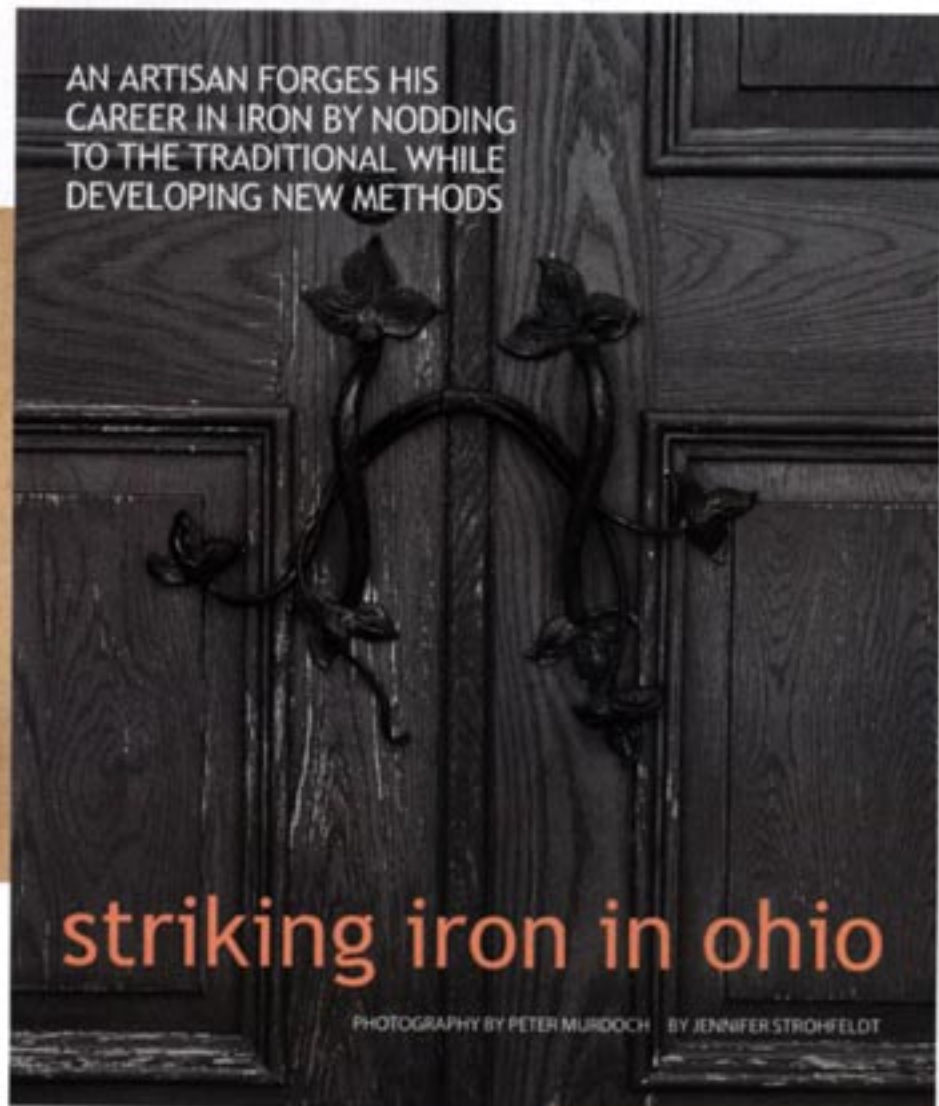




CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A set of Indian-head fire tools. Thumb-latch hardware for the entry doors of an Arts & Crafts home in Columbus, Ohio. This foliate scroll sample from the early days of Bokenkamp's Forge still rests in the shop window. Mark Bokenkamp illustrates the formation of a scroll, beginning with its curve over the edge of an anvil. SEE RESOURCES, PAGE 112



AN ARTISAN FORGES HIS CAREER IN IRON BY NODDING TO THE TRADITIONAL WHILE DEVELOPING NEW METHODS



## striking iron in ohio

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER MURDOCH BY JENNIFER STROHFELDT

UNLIKE MANY ARTISANS IN THE United States, Mark Bokenkamp has never relied on a day job to support his art. For 30 years, in good and bad times, he has worked solely as a blacksmith. Getting started was a challenge. In his first year of business, Bokenkamp notes that his kitchen garden put more food on the table than the revenue from his commissions. But perseverance is inherent in the character and craft of the blacksmith.

Consider the process of forging iron: Unlike cast iron that is poured into a mold and set, wrought iron is crafted by hand. "Basically, everything is shaped by hammering, bending, and twisting," Bokenkamp explains, describing iron as "a fluid medium" that one is "free to shape."

When the design emerges and the piece cools from temperatures as high

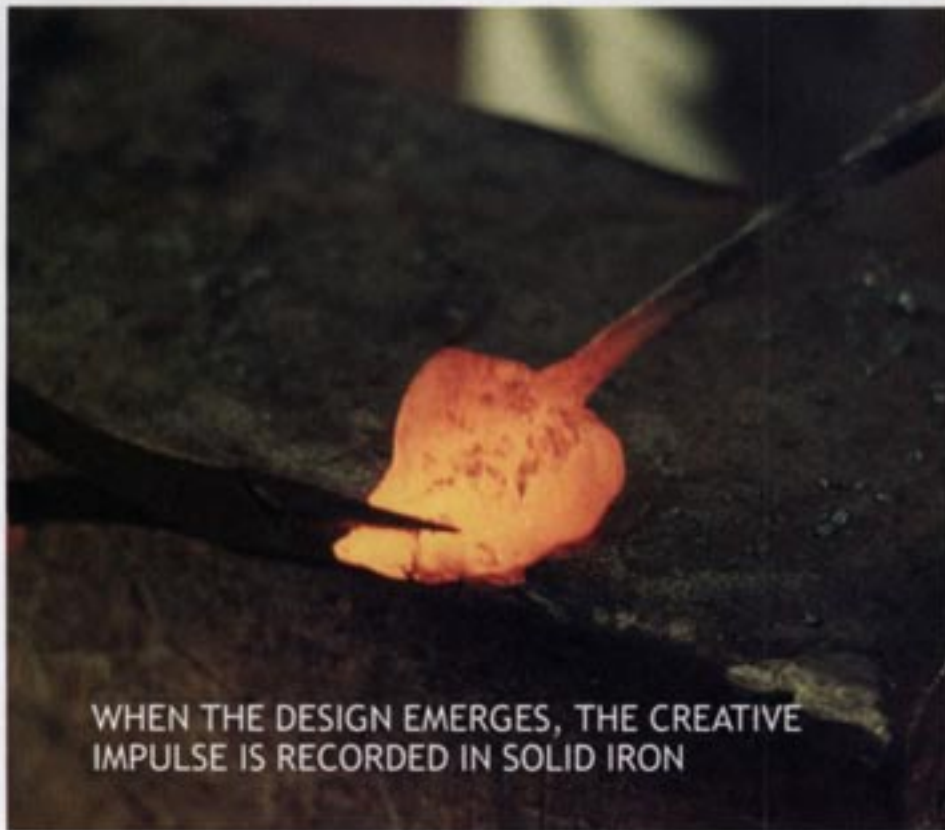




as 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit, the creative impulse is recorded in one of the world's strongest materials.

Bokenkamp's first professional experience as a blacksmith was in 1974 at the newly opened Village of the Ohio Historical Society. The village was a center for living history, employing weavers, gunsmiths, cabinetmakers, and other crafters to portray the artisans typical of an 1860s Ohio county seat.

It was there that Bokenkamp refined his forging skills, creating objects including fireplace tools, cooking utensils, and horseshoes,



WHEN THE DESIGN EMERGES, THE CREATIVE  
IMPULSE IS RECORDED IN SOLID IRON



TOP LEFT: Bokenkamp with the tools of the trade: a hammer and a pair of tongs. ABOVE: This leaf and stem are formed from a uniform bar of iron slightly thicker than the stem. The stem is hammered out toward the head, forcing the excess material to accumulate in a mass, which is then shaped into a leaf. Because of the material's inherent plasticity when heated, nothing needs to be added or taken away. RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: A detail of a fire-tool handle in the form of an Indian-head silhouette with brass inlay accents. Several of a series of wall sconces in progress, designed and commissioned by architect Cole Smith and destined for a building in Dallas. A pair of candlesticks, each composed of five separate pieces that were seamlessly forge-welded. The shaft of the candlesticks is made not by looping the iron, but rather by splitting the metal with a chisel and rejoining it at the base to create the final product.


while explaining the smithy process to museum visitors. Leaving the largely instructive job to develop his craft, Bokenkamp founded his own shop, Bokenkamp's Forge, in 1976 in the rural outskirts of Columbus, Ohio.

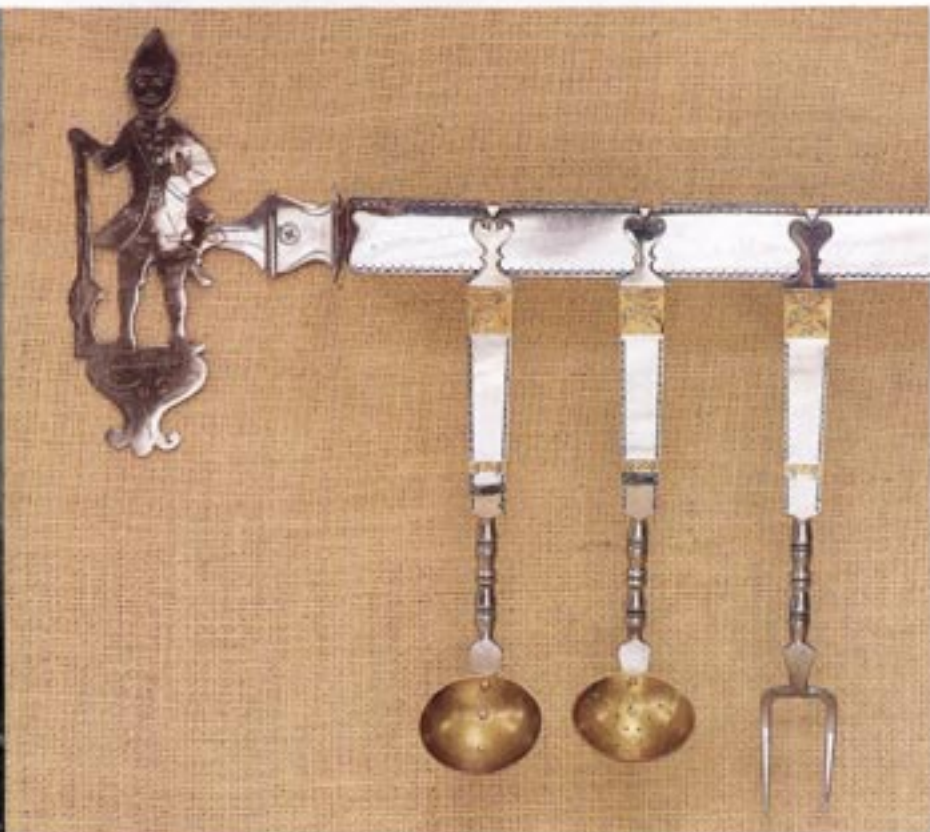
Since then, Bokenkamp has filled many commissions for ironwork. His original, hand-wrought designs include lighting fixtures, wine-cellar gates, cutlery, and weather vanes, as well as decorative hardware.

He mixes formal and naturalistic forms, such as an iron vine of tactile leaves and tendrils clinging to a

gate, fence, or other architectural structure. Bokenkamp also works in a highly polished, traditional idiom, reminiscent of 18th-century English ironwork masters including Robert Bakewell at Melbourne Hall and Jean Tijou at Hampton Court.

"Quite often, I'll still look at traditional work because the job has to fit within a traditional style," he says.

Whatever form Bokenkamp's pieces take, the products of his forge and hammer possess a refinement of technique and a thoughtful artistry that can only result from a lifetime commitment to his craft. 



**TOP RIGHT:** One of a pair of anvils at the Forge upon which each piece is hammered, bent, and twisted into shape. **ABOVE LEFT:** One of Bokenkamp's seven-year-old twin daughters, Annalise, has a quiet moment. **ABOVE:** A set of kitchen utensils that includes five pieces and a wall mount, ending in two Hessian soldiers. Each piece is exquisitely pierced, brass inlaid, and engraved. The utensils are refined by filing away the rough, hammered surface to reveal unblemished steel and brass. The pieces also feature moldings and engraved monograms. **LEFT:** Bokenkamp's daughters, Katherine and Annalise, play on the Forge's grounds.