

David Flynn



forging ahead

Text by Catherine Hobbs

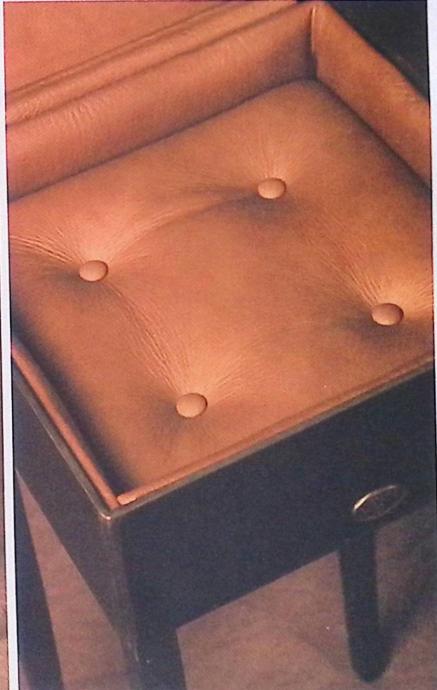
Don't expect David Flynn to shoe your horse—that's a farrier's job. This blacksmith is more likely to take the discarded tools of a farrier and turn them into small sculpture or to twist and hammer hot metal into a clean-lined side table. After all, underneath the coal dust and soot is a trained artist and teacher.

Flynn considers himself first an artist and then a blacksmith because of his educational background and his approach to designing new works. In 1987, he received his M.F.A. in sculpture from the University of Arizona; and previous to that, he had

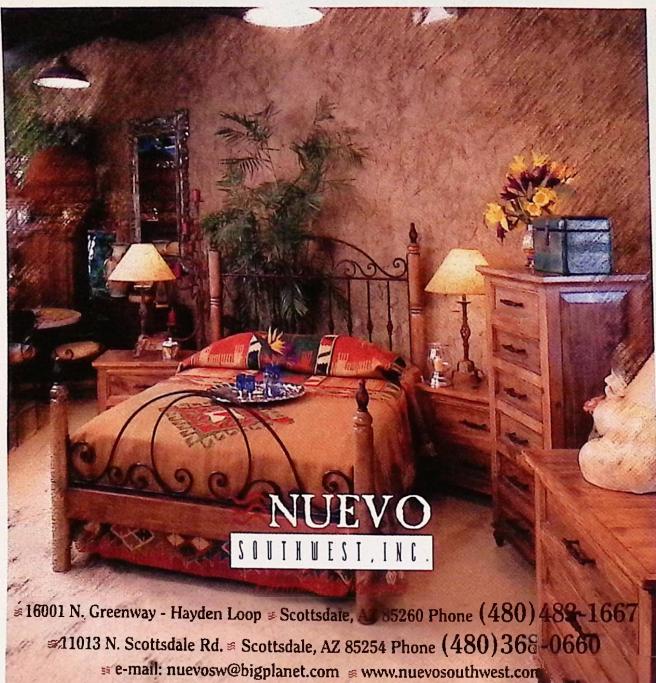
completed undergraduate work in art education.

More important to him than his schooling, however, was the year he spent working alongside sculptor Fred Borcherdt. Borcherdt was blacksmithing in Tucson and doing "big hammer work," which really grabbed Flynn's attention during his master's degree studies. Also at this time, Flynn was teaching Beginning Sculpture and Three-Dimensional Design at the university. Borcherdt's 250-pound Naze power hammer offered Flynn the opportunity of working on larger pieces such as gates and bed frames, rather than simply

Above: Artist/blacksmith David Flynn combines coal forging with big hammer work to mold steel into Southwestern furniture and accessories.



Clockwise, from top left: Wall sconces often are fashioned from pieces of copper and steel, as seen here. • The 22-inch-tall "Tammy" table features such details as curved claw feet and traditional joinery. • With its padded interior compartment, the "Martin" table provides storage for small collectibles.



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The "Cattails" floor lamp boasts delicate glass sconces.

pounding out steel by hand. This was a dramatic change and heavily influenced the Minnesota native's blacksmithing future. "Fred still is, to this day, a great resource," says Flynn.

Next, Flynn taught high school art for several years before moving to Oakland, Calif., to smith alongside artist/blacksmith Michael Bondi of Michael Bondi Metal Designs. Here, Flynn further honed his skills, practicing techniques and gaining more knowledge.

From there, he spent time as the resident artist/blacksmith at Smokey Hills Artisan Community in Osage, Minn., where he demonstrated for tourists various traditional blacksmithing techniques. To earn a little extra money in the process, Flynn began making small metal fish and attaching them to willow sticks with fishing line. He then sold his five-dollar "fish sticks" to admiring children; sometimes he brought in as much as \$100 in a single day. He also relished in his wife, Tammy, who admired his dedication to the craft.

In 1998, the Flynn's settled down in Tucson, and the artist opened his own studio. Diablo Forge, located in the desert off a dirt road, is Flynn's inspira-



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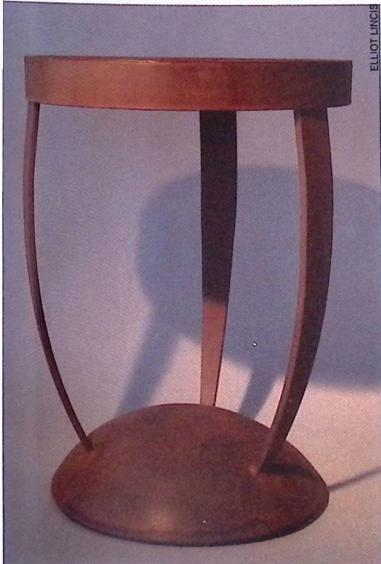


tional oasis. "My commute is through the Saguaro National Monument," remarks the artist, who doesn't seem to mind driving away from the city every day.

At Diablo Forge, sparks fly as Flynn begins hammering out a spent horseshoe. Depending on the size of a piece of steel, he has anywhere from 35 seconds to two minutes to hammer, stretch, twist, bend and stamp the metal before it must be returned to the fire for reheating. He works mainly with so-called mild steel, which comes in various lengths. Also known as machine steel, low-carbon steel, soft steel and blacksmith iron, it is commonly used by blacksmiths.

"There isn't a day that the metal doesn't teach me something," Flynn confesses. Part of the learning process, he continues, comes from experimenting with different ways of forging. Coal forging, which has been practiced by blacksmiths for centuries, is the traditional method of firing up metal. Gas forging, on the other hand, has evolved with technology. It allows for a more controlled heat but fails to spark the inspiration Flynn thrives upon. He utilizes both methods at Diablo Forge, depending on the project.

"Whenever I do a new design or a new idea, I always do it here," he says,



This red table is a collaboration between Flynn and designer Mickey Meulenbeck.

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Elliott Linnis
Gnarly claw feet grasp balls of stone
on this hand-forged table.

pointing to a small coal fire he started with a handful of newspaper. "It's the traditional way. Coal forge always gives me more. It helps to tell me what to do."

Surrounded by tables, gates, lamps, sconces and other pieces he has created, Flynn points out samples of the different decorative techniques he has mastered. These show the endless possibilities in metalwork. "The best way to figure out how to do something is to make six of them," tutors Flynn. Also proof of his talent are the many tools he has forged for himself through the years.

To give his creations a timeless look, Flynn likes to use traditional joinery whenever possible, as opposed to welding and grinding. A table leg, for example, has a tenon on one end that fits into a hole in the adjoining piece. The result is a seamless appearance—clean and done properly, in Flynn's eyes.

A Western theme runs through many of the artist's works: Cowboy hats, wagon wheels, slithering snakes, and barbed wire twists decorate clean-lined lamps and tables. Mickey Meulenbeck of Level 9 Functional Art in Scottsdale is among those Flynn has collaborated with in conceptualizing new pieces. The two met more than 20 years ago through Flynn's older sister, and have worked together off and on during Meulenbeck's interior design career and Flynn's blacksmithing endeavors.

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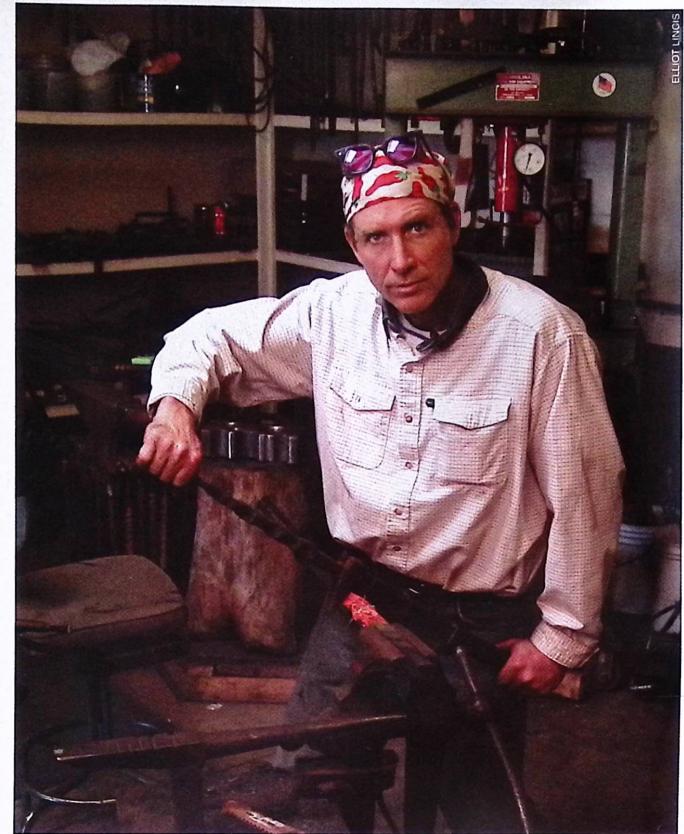
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Flynn at work in his Tucson shop.

Most recently, the pair designed a small line of furniture. "We really were trying to shoot for smaller pieces . . . which we saw a hole in the market for," says Meulenbeck of their final prototypes and finished items. "The pieces work well with Southwestern decor, or for instance, you can take the snake off of the 'Tammy' table, and it's more eclectic."

At Level 9 Functional Art, Meulenbeck and husband, Martin, add some of the finishing touches to Flynn's designs. Martin is an electrical engineer and wires the lamps and wall sconces; Mickey adds finials and whimsical touches to lampshades for custom looks.

Back outside Diablo Forge, "Tammy" tables are being rusted to lighten the steel's color; later, a clear coat will be applied to stop the rusting process. Jon Molden, Flynn's brother-in-law, left the concrete business about a year and a half

ago to work at Diablo Forge. He is learning the tricks of the trade and appreciates the opportunity to try something new. "David's an excellent teacher," he comments. "I couldn't learn from anybody better. He's a true master."

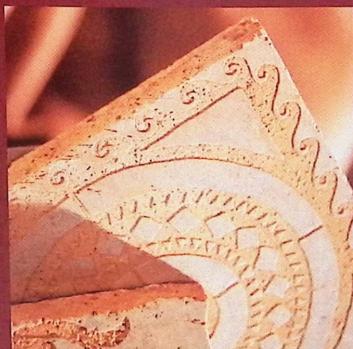
Now Flynn is considering a merging of materials. Outdoor furniture with stamped concrete inlays and accents may be in the future for Diablo Forge, along with bamboo-style designs scheduled for completion in June.

As for the big picture, this teacher-at-heart dreams of opening a school for troubled and less-fortunate teens that would use blacksmithing to "instill confidence, build self-esteem and reinforce a strong work ethic." With an emphasis on "design, welding, job diversification and job placement," Flynn would strive to help others forge a future.

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