



The Joining of Art, History and Education

By Dave Hurst

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Standing on a grassy patch beside a pedestrian bridge that crosses the Conemaugh River in Johnstown, it is framed by green hills, the near-end of Cambria City, the river and a single set of railroad tracks.

About 12-feet tall, 16-feet wide, and composed of various lengths of 10-inch steel I-beams, joined vertically and horizontally, this might appear to a casual observer to be a bit of surplus bridge-superstructure. Not so.

This is Johnstown's newest piece of public art. It's also Johnstown's newest piece of history. For both art and history are important components both of this sculpture and of its creator: the Center for Metal Arts.

To see the art and the history, look at the way these I-beams were joined. The beams weren't cast or welded or bolted into this form, they were cut and riveted together – just as our buildings and bridges were a century ago.

Neat, symmetrical groupings of round-headed rivets give this sculpture its soul and surprising strength. For this art was created using the old techniques:

Holes were punched or burned. Rivets were formed on one end from pieces of round bars, using various dies and presses. Corresponding holes in two sections were lined up, then the other ends of the rivets were heated, inserted and hammered home with compressed air hammers.

“That's essentially how they built all the bridges around town – and a lot of these buildings,” the CMA's Dan Neville told me. “So what we're doing has a real connection with history here.”

But Dan and his co-director, Patrick Quinn, aren't just living historians, metal-working the old way; both are artists and teachers with Master of Fine Arts degrees. The best way to think of the Center for Metal Arts is as a school, an art studio and a blacksmith shop – all joined by history.

This new public piece of art, for example, was produced by a week-long class that attracted 11 students from across the country. The class instructor, Steve Howell, was from Seattle, WA.

“What I'm here teaching is hot riveting,” said Steve during the class, observing that rivets still hold much of our industrial infrastructure together even though many of those structures may be more than 100 years old. “Modern engineering tends to turn its nose down at it, but riveting still does the job.”

With the last riveted bridges built back in the 1970s, much of this old technology is being lost. Which makes people like Steve, Dan and Patrick more than artists or blacksmiths. They are industrial archaeologists, rediscovering the old ways of ironworking.

That's true in ways beyond riveting for Patrick and Dan, who relocated their Center for Metal Arts here from upstate New York more than a year ago. They moved into what once was the Cambria Iron Company – a world leader in integrated steelmaking during the 1870s and '80s – and is the Cambria Iron and Steel National Historic Landmark today.

Dan and Patrick are working to restore an industrial blacksmith shop that dates to 1869 and contains five massive power-hammers, including one that brings up to 10 tons of force and is owned by the Smithsonian Institution. They already have successfully returned one of the smaller hammers to working condition, using compressed air to operate it.

Meanwhile, the CMA is occupying three of the old Cambria mill buildings, including the old Rolling Mill Office, which soon will house a metalsmithing classroom, retail store, library, studio and gallery; and a former church rectory in neighboring Cambria City, which is being used for student housing.

So this Center for Metal Arts is drawing students, teachers and artists to Johnstown. It is preserving historical technologies. And it's creating art.

The I-beam sculpture symbolizes all of that, plus Johnstown's past, present and maybe even its future. When a grouping of I-beams gets imbued with that much meaning, it's got to be art.

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