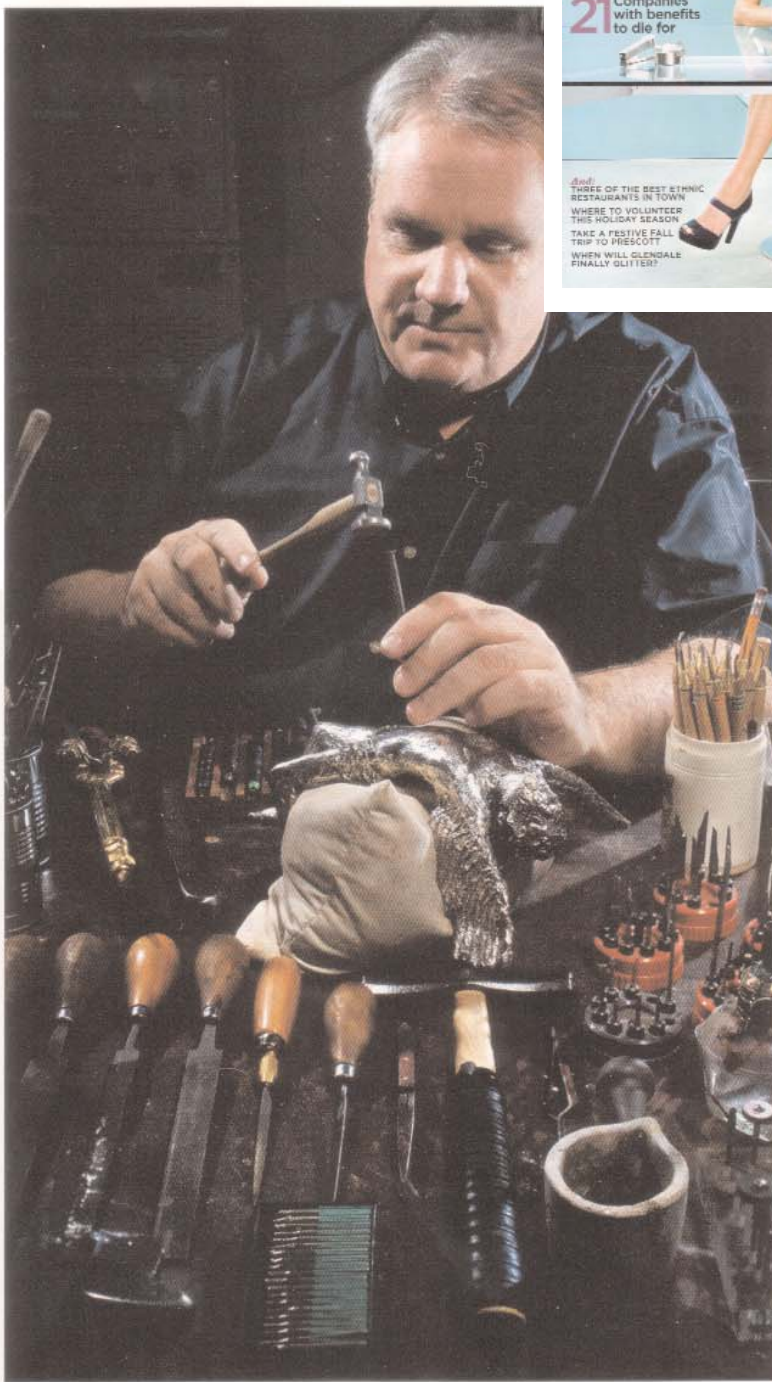
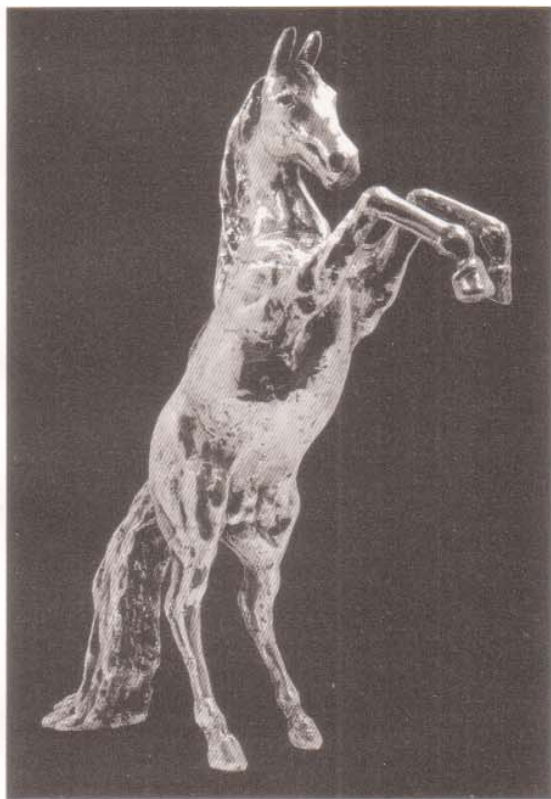


At Home Silversmith

Precious Metal

A VALLEY MAN FOUND HIS PASSION FOR SCULPTING METAL AT SUMMER CAMP. NOW, HE'S ONE OF A HANDFUL OF ARTISANS WHO CRAFT MADE-TO-ORDER SILVER AND GOLD OBJECTS D'ART FOR THE HOME.



MOST PEOPLE DON'T FIND THEIR DESTINY AT summer camp, but that's exactly what happened to Stephen Van O'Meara, who spent half of his summer days tucked inside a craft hut in Colorado learning to make keepsakes out of metal. He spent the other half of his days shooting rifles. He was 11, after all.

But he was not destined to become a sharp shooter; rather, he would become one of a half dozen silversmiths left in the country who produce large volumes of work for Americans who want one-of-a-kind objects d'art in the home.

From his Phoenix home studio, known as O'Meara Sterling,

O'Meara crafts everything from silver and gold baby cups to Jewish Kiddush cups, engagement rings to chess games, flower vases to perfectly-scaled replicas of famous sculptures. To understand the intricacy of his work, you almost need to see it up-close

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O'Meara Sterling

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PHOTO COURTESY STEPHEN VAN O'MEARA/O'MEARA STERLING, RIGHT, BY SAM MALVEN, LEFT

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and hold it in your hands. A 7-by-6-inch seashell (\$9,500) is so meticulously carved that it could pass for an actual shell that has been plated in silver. It isn't until you lift the conch that you realize its heft, which comes only from solid metal. And silver is the most reflective metal, O'Meara points out.

He shows off his prowess in a variety of pieces, each crafted with a different technique learned and honed over decades of practice. One vase's horizontal grooves and asymmetrical lip mimic the waves of the ocean – a decidedly modern piece – while another is painstakingly hand-hammered and rounded in a way that suggests it would be at home in an English castle.

At trade shows, by phone and over the Internet, people from across the country ask him to make one-of-a-kind objects, including special cups for weddings, checkers sets, cigar holders and centerpieces that match the legs of a favorite dining room table. Prices range from \$350 to \$350,000.

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"I try to make things of an heirloom quality," he says. "It's not something you're going to throw away in a throw-away society. I want things to feel precious."

At once, O'Meara touches on his biggest selling point and his biggest hurdle. He is promoting his craft at a time when custom work is counterintuitive, a time when consumers stroll to the mailbox to pick up the latest Pottery Barn/Restoration Hardware/Crate & Barrel catalog and don't seem too bothered about buying home décor that's been stamped out in a factory far, far away for a price that is far, far less.

Add to that a lousy economy, and objects d'art can start to seem like extravagances.

"One of the things people have stopped investing in is the ceremony of their life. I grew up in a fountain-pen-and-china generation, and we live in a Bic-and-paper-plate generation," he says. "We really do live in this standardized culture. For the sake of efficiency, we've taken the kinder, gentler things out of life.

"In that way, I hope to change people."

O'Meara and his wife, Amy, who spearheads sales and marketing, practice what

they preach. They wake up every morning and make tea in a silver kettle, and, with a rosewood dipper, they drizzle in the honey from a silver honey pot. (And since Amy is a native of Scotland, you can bet it's good tea.)

The couple met at an art show eight years ago in England. Amy was there to support her dad, who crafts replicas of buildings in miniature, and quickly fell in love.

At 19, she published a newspaper promoting environmental causes for youth and was cited as a "sustainable development success story" by the United Nations. Now she finds herself promoting an artform that has become just as precious to her.

When customers pick up a certain vase she loves, she resists the urge to wrest it from their hands.

"The more I see them," she says, gesturing to the hand-hammered vase that is rounded just so, "the more it becomes part of my life, and it's hard to let it go. I think when it sells I'll be sad for a couple days."

The O'Mearas say they see a trend afoot in home furnishings, even with the economic downslide. The pendulum is swing-



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ing the other way, and what homeowners really want is something unique, something of heirloom quality, something that isn't meant to be thrown away – even in a throw-away generation. Though the couple recently vacated their Scottsdale gallery because of rising rental rates, O'Meara's studio has seen a steady stream of projects.

"Your bench has never been empty as long as I've known you," Amy tells him, adding, "Our company motto is 'yes.' A custom order can take up to a year.... People in this country are hungry for some-

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thing different, handmade." And they are willing to wait for it.

O'Meara says it's always been a word-of-mouth business. After learning silversmithing at summer camp, he started making jewelry for family and friends in high school. Then, at 17, he ventured to Mexico, where a silverware maker offered him a factory tour. "That's really what clinched the deal," he says.

That year, he opened his first gallery and moved to Santa Fe, where he fell into a group of classical artists who rallied against the modernist movement that had begun to dominate walls and shelves. "Traditional techniques were being decimated by clichés and....," he searches around for the right word then spits it out like something distasteful, "entertainment."

O'Meara has indeed lived the artist's life, forgoing traditional notions of entertainment. He admits that when a friend told him Magic Johnson had been diagnosed with HIV, he had no idea who Magic Johnson was. His heroes are Galileo, Bernini and Filippo Brunelleschi. And while he tried a career as an American Airlines pilot from

1993 to 2000, the arts won him back.

"Being an artist is a weird thing because the whole world runs on tires and batteries," he says. "I live in another world, a world dominated by aesthetics, as most artists do."

Perhaps this is why he is happiest in his studio, collaborating with his wife, burnishing a piece of metal over a spinning form. He happily tells people that silver is the most reflective of all metals, has antibacterial qualities and only tarnishes if you don't use it.

"I think that people have a background destiny they spend their whole life running away from," he says, "and it's what you end up doing."

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