STRUCK BY MODERNISM: C. CARL JENNINGS, CALIFORNIA ARTIST-BLACKSMITH

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STRUCK BY MODERNISM: C. Carl Jennings, California Artist-Blacksmith explores the rugged individualism of C. Carl Jennings (1910-2003), highlighting his physically demanding work as a blacksmith and his distinctive, modern approach to ironwork.

Jennings went beyond what he called “plain blacksmithing” to pioneer the role of the artist-blacksmith in postwar California. A third-generation smith with a penchant for drawing, he received an education from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland (renamed California College of the Arts in 2003). His artistry is evident in sculpture and refined vessels, and objects such as hand-forged fireplace implements, dramatic gates and light fixtures. Jennings’ vigorous metal forms share a sense of visual simplicity and confident execution.

He was championed as an inspirational mentor by the community of American artist-blacksmiths that flourished during the 1970s, but Jennings’ artwork has received little exposure outside of this small group. Despite showing his work at major museums throughout California, his name remains largely absent from the familiar list of Northern California studio craftspeople with whom he regularly exhibited during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. STRUCK BY MODERNISM revisits Jennings’ life and career, recognizes his important place in the context of the studio crafts movement and celebrates the West’s first postwar blacksmith.

ABOUT C. CARL JENNINGS

Every blow from Carl Jennings’ hammer delivered something of his creative life force and forged a unique body of work that combined the ancient traditions of blacksmithing with mid-20th century sculpture and the design aesthetic of post-war modernism.

When, after nearly twenty years of working as a “plain blacksmith,” Jennings finally went into business for himself in 1947, he was perfectly in step with the Bay Area’s burgeoning modern design community. He opened El Diablo Forge east of Berkeley in Lafayette, California, at a critical point in the history of American craft. The end of World War II marked the beginning of an unprecedented boom in studio
craft, as art programs in colleges and other institutions that reinforced modernist principles in both fine and applied arts were bolstered and expanded by the effects of the G.I. Bill.

Over the next twenty years, a period associated with the popularity of midcentury modern design and the studio craft movement in America, Jennings synthesized ancient traditions of the blacksmith with the abbreviated, abstracted forms of modernist sculpture. This unusual combination characterized the fireplace tools and screens, light fixtures, candle holders, gates, grillwork and other objects produced in his forge in Lafayette. It proved to be a successful, if surprising, marriage between a medium known for its rugged texture and permanence, suggestive of bygone historical periods and demanding brute force, and the technologically advanced, labor-saving ethos and sophisticated look of midcentury modernism.

By the late 1950s Jennings had begun to enter his work in various Northern California group exhibitions and quickly became a regular presence in the Bay Area designer-craftsmen scene. He exhibited a wrought iron grill in the September, 1958 San Francisco Art Festival which received a purchase award and was accessioned into the City’s Civic Art Collection. Jennings and his wife Elizabeth both became members of the Metal Arts Guild at around this time and Carl participated in the group’s 1961 annual exhibition at the de Young Museum. An organization formed in 1951 that united Bay Area modern metalsmiths and jewelers, the MAG helped to propel the studio craft movement in California and beyond.

In 1963 Jennings was represented in the California Craftsmen’s Second Biennial presented by the Oakland Art Museum and the American Craftsmen’s Council. Jennings was invited to exhibit his own selection of works at the California Crafts IX exhibition in 1965. He was represented by a sconce and a small animal sculpture in Media ‘65 and a “ten-bulb forged iron and wood lantern” in Media ‘68. The blacksmith’s first one person show, Carl Jennings: Forged Iron, opened at the Richmond Art Center in December, 1964.

Jennings spent roughly five years (1970 - 1975) building a remarkable round house in rural Sonoma with his wife Elizabeth, an effort that represents his most comprehensive achievement. Their shared domestic environment, the house and landscape, became an expressive total statement into which he poured his creativity and inspiration. But as interest in blacksmithing grew in California later in the decade, Jennings became part of a spirited community that included both amateur
and professional blacksmiths and he increasingly gained recognition.

Two relatively early examples of Jennings' work, a candleholder and a sculpture, were included in the 1977 volume Decorative and Sculptural Ironwork by popular craft writer Dona Meilach. The book placed Jennings firmly within a national context and was, up to that point, the most comprehensive survey of contemporary ironwork in the United States. He was invited to teach blacksmithing at the College of the Redwoods near Eureka, California, and became a founding member of the California Blacksmith Association in 1977. These experiences brought him into contact with smiths who appreciated his groundbreaking role in the field and became valued friends in the ensuing decades. Jennings inspired many of these rugged individualists to establish their own forges. As a respected mentor in the national blacksmithing community, Jennings frequently traveled to conferences and participated in workshops well into his eighties.

Jennings was elected to the College of Fellows of the American Craft Council in 1988 and presented with a lifetime achievement award by the Artist-Blacksmiths’ Association of North America. The same year, he was named a Sonoma Treasure Artist by the City of Sonoma. In 1990 he was recognized as a Master Metalsmith by the National Ornamental Iron Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, and honored with an exhibition of his current work. Over the next decade or so, in addition to the Smithsonian Institution knocking at his door in 1994, a stream of articles documenting Carl Jennings life, career, and recent works appeared in such magazines as Metalsmith, Anvil Magazine and American Craft.

Carl Jennings was 93 years old when he died in May, 2003, and he kept working, literally, until the end.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

A San Diego native, Dave Hampton is immersed in the study of California’s post-war visual arts community. He has conducted extensive interviews and developed friendships with many artists and object makers working in Southern California, the San Francisco Bay Area and the Southwestern United States during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. A collector, researcher and artist’s representative, Hampton has sought to renew interest in these artists not simply for their work, but for the distinctive communities they created and their contributions to art and craft history on a regional and national level.
In 2007 Hampton contributed an essay “Art From the End of the Line” to The Hubbell Press publication Seeds of Art, and an article, “Collaboration: Artist and Architect,” for the Palm Springs Modernism Week Program, both of which focused on the San Diego art and architecture community. In 2008 Hampton launched a self-published Art Investigations Series in order to document influential but relatively obscure artists. Completed titles include “The Seeger Studio: 1957-1962,” “Pouring Metal in the South Bay: The 1960s California Artist-Foundry Movement” and “Arizona Designer-Craftsmen - In The Beginning.” He has also been a frequent contributor to the KPBS Culture Lust blog. In 2011 Hampton curated the exhibition SAN DIEGO’S CRAFT REVOLUTION at Mingei International Museum and wrote the text for the companion publication. In 2012 he opened CONTEMPORARY ART WINS A BEACHHEAD: The La Jolla School of Arts 1960-1964 at Oceanside Museum of Art.

ABOUT MINGEI INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM

Located in San Diego’s Balboa Park, Mingei International Museum collects, preserves and exhibits “art of the world, art of the people,” including folk art, craft and design from all eras and cultures of the world. A non-profit institution funded by admission, individuals, and community support, the Museum offers inspiring exhibitions and diverse educational programs to more than 100,000 visitors a year. Institutional support for Mingei International Museum is provided in part by the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.

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