

"I'm very intrigued with line and curve. Once I got that figured out, going from abstract curves to wings and manes is pretty natural. I love doing horses and birds because it's so easy to make them grand!"

Sculptor
Douglas Hays



"Three Horses"
12" x 17" x 9"
Oxidized Steel



Creating "Thunder"
Photo credit: Hetsy Reed



"Red Horse"
3" x 9" x 7.5"
Power Coated Steel

"Wind"
29" x 16" x 10"
Oxidized Steel

From Forge to **FINE ART**

By Charlene Rose Johnson

His blacksmith shop sits in the heart of rural, central Florida provoking images of yesteryear and laid-back times. Instead of a spreading chestnut tree, palms and palmetto adorn the sandy yard. Stepping from sunshine and dust motes through the open door of the shop into the old-timey clutter of tools and forges, anvils and steel, one might wonder how rare beauty can be born from such rusty, dusty surroundings. Yet, like wildflowers on a beach, they spring forth.

Douglas Hays's latest series of sketches or maquettes of horses takes his art form of blacksmithing, also called metalsmithing to a new high. They represent a marriage of all the techniques he's learned and skills he's mastered over 20 plus years of fine art work with metal.

Hays is in his element as he moves comfortably about his shop explaining his motives for creating these stunning, emotive 3D sculptures from flat sheets of steel. "I think people have had a long, deep connection



"The fire of forge and torch becomes the fire of a horse"

Douglas Hays forging steel to steed.

with horses. I am drawn to sculpting them because of their power, nobility and expressiveness." It's not easy packing expression into steel, but Douglas Hays does it with style.

As he picks up pieces of flat, cut steel, a future mane, he adds, "When I start a horse I have a basic idea of what I'm going to do, what shapes I will use, but each one takes on its own personality. I often exaggerate features or add elements but I do that because horses really seem to be bigger than life. Still, each horse I make isn't my idea of what it should be; I sculpt them in the way I feel they would see themselves.

Hays comes from a long line of farmers on his dad's side of the family. On the family farmstead in Missouri, the old barn, yokes, tack and wagons still exist. They used horses to work the land long before there were tractors. Doug feels he inherited his feel for, and love of the horse. "It's in your blood when it goes back that far," he mused.

But Hays' father plucked his family off the farm in Missouri and moved them to St. Louis to make a better life. Suddenly, little boy Hays was surrounded with art. The large, public art of St. Louis also got into his blood. "I grew up with art all around me so that it became both part of my core and also invisible," he said. "I was imprinted, though I didn't know it then."

When he was 13, the family moved again, this time to central Florida to be near his mother's family. At that time, Marion County was very rural, though an equine capital of the world, known for producing top-class thoroughbred race horses and other breeds. But it was not particularly lucrative for a budding artist.

"The energy of the horse and the energy of the forge coming together at the same time in his life may have been one of those serendipitous connections, a life-changing moment."

While still in high school, he began exercising horses for neighbors with too little time, deepening his personal connection to the animal. At the same time, he met a group of historical re-enactors who forged their own utensils and tools. The energy of the horse and the energy of the forge coming together at the same time in his life may have been one of those serendipitous connections, a life-changing moment. "I watched them make little things, utilitarian stuff the way everyone used to do on farms. The way they could heat and shape metal; I was enthralled by that." He learned how to forge on old, unsophisticated equipment. "They didn't even have coal; they used charcoal briquettes," he added.

After graduating from high school, Doug pursued a degree in teaching. But his true path had already been "forged." By the time he earned his degree, he had been creating things to help pay his way through school: knives, jewelry, household items. He was hooked on forge and anvil, so instead of teaching he began working with interior designers and furniture stores, making beautiful, utilitarian things like drapery rods and drawer pulls, and in the process developing his burgeoning skill.

But it wasn't until 1992 when he joined ABANA – the Artist Blacksmiths' Association of North America and began meeting some of the people who forged and crafted art from metal, that he realized forging really could create fine art. "That's when I connected the dots and realized I could do that kind of artwork; that's the path I wanted for my life."

People who see Doug's artwork often comment on the flow and the energy of his pieces. Doug began with abstract shapes. "I'm very intrigued with line and curve. Once I got that figured out, going from abstract curves to wings and manes was pretty natural. I love doing horses and birds because it's so easy to make them grand."

Another life-changing shift occurred when Doug was exposed to the work of Albert Paley. "He works on a scale that's obscenely monumental, things bigger than buildings. After that I thought, "Oh yeah, I can reach for the sky. I can do big!"

But he had to let go of forging. In order to work in large scale it was neither necessary nor feasible to forge large pieces. "So now the hammer and the anvil is just another tool in my tool chest," he said. Specialized pliers for bending, a steel-cutting machine he invented himself, torches and computers are also part of his unique toolkit.

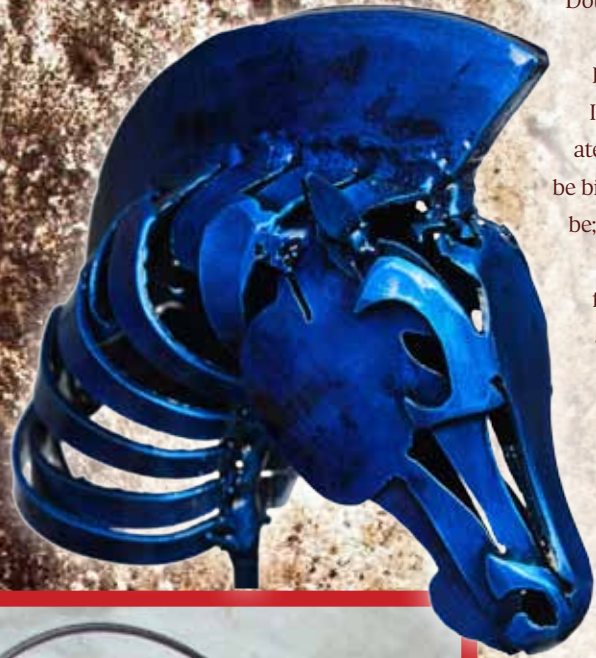
Today, Doug's artform merges forging and fabrication. "Forging steel is pretty straightforward. Once it's hot, it's soft and you bend it the way you want it to go, like working with clay. Fabrication begins with flat sheets of cutout steel, then bending, shaping and welding one piece onto another.

"If you look at just the flat pieces, they don't look like a horse. I heat a piece with a torch so that I can bend it and pose it. If I'm creating a big piece I build it up (fabrication); when it's time for finer detail like eyes and face, I draw it out (forging)."

Magic occurs as he begins to build, weld, draw out and shape. Something powerful, full of emotion and energy, a fierce gaze or the belligerent toss of a mane, springs to life. The fire of forge and torch becomes the fire of a horse.

Doug's artwork including his first series of horses, are placed all over the southeast, while his 14-foot heron in a fountain became the icon for the city of Eustis. In the last 10 years, his larger pieces have become public art of the sort he grew up with in St. Louis. But his new series of horses takes everything to a higher level yet, with powder-coating techniques to produce eye-popping colors. One of these recently won an honorable mention in a world-wide art contest.

Doug is living a dream come true. "I make the maquettes, but then I have to find clients to turn them into lifesize pieces. Maybe someday I'll be able to underwrite my own work and place it, or find the client after the work is done. That would be the BIG dream come true. But I don't ever go a day without feeling grateful and blessed that I get to do the work I love."



"Blue Horse"
2.3" x 9" x 7 1/2"
Powder Coated
Steel



"Winged Horse"
0" x 0" x 0"
Power Coated Steel?



"Heron," 14' High
Stainless Steel, Eustis, FL



"Zephyr"
16" x 17" x 7"
Forged Steel,
Oxidized Patina



"Leviathan"
7 1/2' Tall
Temper Colored Mild Steel

To view more of Doug's work go to:
www.doughaysart.com