

Think "Metalwork" On Your Next Project

Written by NOMMA's Publications Committee

When people think of ornamental metal they usually conjure up images of a traditional design featuring straight pickets and a black finish. What most people don't realize is that since the 1970s, the creative energy in the ornamental metals industry has virtually exploded. There are two major reasons for the resurgence of this ancient craft. First, the technology has greatly increased, and second, Old World blacksmithing has made a major comeback. These days it's common to walk into an ornamental shop and see an anvil alongside a computer CAD system or an electrostatic paint sprayer. A savvy fabricator can combine the best of old and new technologies to provide an outstanding driveway gate, grand stair railing, or fence. In fact, the motto for many shops is, "If you can put it on paper, we can fabricate it."

Forgings and Castings:

Before you order your first ornamental metal product it's a good idea to educate yourself on the terminology. For instance, there is great confusion over the term "wrought iron." True wrought iron is no longer produced in this country and the term is now used to describe mild steel that is "hot worked" or "forged." Just how the "wrought iron" look will be created leads to even more options. To achieve a truly custom effect, a builder can hire a blacksmith. However, these days, you can still get the desired look without blacksmithing. That's because various suppliers offer a full line of pre-made forgings. Many of the forgings are imported from countries that are known for their metalwork, such as France and Italy. Yet another option is to order castings, which are extremely popular in the industry. Hundreds of styles are available, and if the desired piece can't be found, a fabricator can often modify an existing design. Plus, there is always the option of ordering a custom casting. Forgings and castings have their pros and cons, and what works best simply depends on the application and the desired effect (and budget!).

A Few Guidelines

While deciding whether to use forging or castings is a primary decision, there are many other factors to consider as well:

Finishing - This is one area where technology has really taken off. Thermal spraying and powder coating are two options offered by a growing number of fabricators. Exotic finishes are becoming more popular and there are many options available. With a faked patina, for instance, a fabricator may either have his or her own technique or may use a specialty supplier.

Joints - Specifying the degree of finish on joints is a big problem area, mainly because terms like "polished welds" have different meanings to every person. NOMMA has helped the situation by publishing the Joint Finish Guideline, which shows four different quality levels for a welded joint. Keep in mind that the amount of finishing desired on a weld joint can greatly influence price.

Anchorage - Preset anchors are much more difficult to work with and may result in increased costs and delays.

Finish on Materials - Specifications should not only include type of paint, but also degree of grinding or polishing. Polished finishes should be specified by standard industry grades or grit size. Anodized finishes should be quoted by a specific number. In many cases, a fabricator will provide a sample before coating the entire project. As with any job, clear specifications and good communication will cut off most problems "at the pass." Other more detailed items to consider are

the gauge of the metal, whether bar or hollow tubing should be used, and the type of priming (if any).

Conclusion

Your imagination is the only limit on what is possible with metalwork. Once a design is finalized, a skilled fabricator will be glad to check the practicality and economics of an idea. Aside from its beauty, metal is functional, durable, and typically lower in maintenance costs. Thanks to the widespread use of stock components, projects can be completed more quickly and economically. In summary, ornamental metal can provide a creative solution to your design needs. For more info on NOMMA, call (404) 363-4009. E-mail: nommainfo@nomma.org.