

Enrique Vega

The following questionnaire was completed in conversation with interviewer Aran Galligan in May, 2007.

In general, why do you do what you do?

I love using a torch ... it allows you to be portable

I guess it's a need. It started at seven years old in Cuba. I had an uncle that was a painter. He instilled a desire in me to be creative. Throughout my life my attention has been on my visual senses. I studied photography in college and worked as a professional photographer for a few years, until I became

tired of working in 2D. My start in metal was with welding. I was trying to make a living at it. I got a degree in welding and worked in that industry for a while. A welder friend gave me *The Edge of the Anvil* by Jack Andrews and that was my first exposure to blacksmithing. I started using this book to learn blacksmithing. I was exposed to ABANA (the Artist Blacksmith's Association of North America) and built my first forge. My first major commission was a set of four sculptural panels at Biltmore mall in 1984. That transitioned me from welder to artist.



*Enrique Vega- Console Table, Detail
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

What influences your work?

Art Nouveau¹: The curvilinear aspect of metalwork. I like to reference that style and I think that it is pleasing to the eye.

Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how? How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Yes, it is important. Crafts are about knowing the techniques to allow you to understand an object. At first I was drawn to sculpture. This was hard to make a

¹ Art Nouveau was an design and architectural movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries characterized by stylistic, curvilinear depictions of the natural world.

living doing this work. I wasn't able to make enough money to compensate me for the time that I was putting into my sculptural work. So I turned to functional art. People were more willing to buy functional work than sculpture. But with functional work you need to be mindful of the concept of form following function. Learning the history of joining metals helps with functionality of the work. It is also important for me to incorporate historical techniques in as design elements.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

The beauty of being your own boss and having a studio at home is that you get to work whenever, although I can't work too late because of the sound of the power hammer. I also don't have heat or air conditioning in my studio, so I don't spend much time in there during extreme seasons.

I work in isolation. Over the years I've had people work with me on large commissions. My son worked with me for about four years. He's 25. Last year he decided that being a blacksmith was too hard. Now he's in school for engineering. I live out in the country. My house and studio are on the same property. I love it. Now as I'm getting older there is a desire to expand my horizons. Now I'm doing workshops.

I'm not too involved with the local crafts community now. I use to be president of Art Space in Raleigh.

I am the founder of www.artmetal.com and the art metal project. It started in 1994. It's a great online worldwide community. My main community is online. I share my knowledge and my work with several hundred members. On my site there are many documentaries on projects that I've done. It used to be very hard to find info on blacksmithing so I do this to help make it easier for people to find information. If the project has lots of techniques then I photograph it to share online for other metalworkers.

Very little of my commissions are in-state. 98% of work comes from the Internet. Most of my work goes to California. If it wasn't for the Internet I don't know what I'd be doing. I've only done six in-state private commissions – the rest are out of state. The locals don't want to pay what I need for the work. The Internet allows artist to sell directly without going through a gallery.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

I've taken class with Francis Witticar. I'd consider him to be a master but he doesn't consider himself a master. He believes that when you are a master then that means that there is nothing left to learn. There are so many techniques. You can master one technique but there are so many other techniques that you may not

be a master. I would consider myself a master of mortise and tendon but not a master of metal. There is always something to learn. I need to listen to the metal. I open myself up and listen to the metal to see what it is telling me, because then the metal teaches me how it needs to be worked.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there?

Born in Cuba. I moved to Miami at eight. I've lived in North Carolina for more than 40 years. I love the variety of terrain in North Carolina, especially near Jordan Lake. Florida is so flat – there is no change in scenery. Here there are rolling hills and pasturelands. It's a nice place to live.

How long have you lived in the South? If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it?

I don't consider myself a typical Southerner. Cuban culture is instilled in me, but most of my friends are North Carolinians.

Living in the South affects my work in a conservative way. Southerners are conservative. My work is not loud or shocking. It has a homegrown feeling. My immediate area affects that and makes it more wholesome.

If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South?

My mother got a job working as a pharmacist aide in North Carolina. My mother was a pharmacist in Cuba and my father was a lawyer. Their degrees were not acknowledged in United States. My mother was very influential. She didn't want us to get caught up in little Havana. She wanted to be around Americans if we were going to live in America. I went to school at Randolph Tech College in Piedmont.

Is your work influenced by the South in any way? Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

I consider my work to be international – Art Nouveau. Flowing of lines. I hadn't thought about the connection between North Carolina and Nouveau but there is so much growth here. After a trip across the United States I realized how much growth there is here in North Carolina. You feel engulfed by nature, almost to the point of being suffocated by all of the growth. I don't know if this is the reason I'm so attracted to the curvilinear line. I guess I never really thought about it. I would have to say yes it does affect it. I'm not interested in rectilinear lines. When I started as an artist—art had that push but I wasn't interested. I like the evidence of a human touch by a softer line.

My work in the 80's was contrary to the popular style. Art Nouveau and Art Deco have interlaced. There is a big difference though. Deco is rectilinear. Curvier lines are harder to reproduce.

In Spain the ironwork is very curved. It's much more enticing. Architect Antonio Gaudi from Spain is a big influence from a historical perspective. I started by making work based on what was coming from my heart, and then someone pointed out that my work had an Art Nouveau influence, so I started to research that style.

How is your work evolving?

At this time in my life looking more towards passing the knowledge onto other people. Design wise I don't think that my work is evolving anymore than it has in the past ten years.

A new thing that is exciting for me is using LED (light emitting diode) lighting and fiber optics in this chandelier that I am working on. It will have a remote to change the color of the lights. This will be the first time I incorporate modern lighting with traditional blacksmithing techniques.

When you look at this piece of furniture (the table for the exhibition) it's not really Nouveau. But has lots of texture in it.

Using a CNC (computer numerical control) plasma cutter uses computer technology to cut the metal. You can reproduce the design over and over again. It allows you to make production type work and make more than minimum wage on it. But I prefer to do one-of-a-kind commission work.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you?

Yes I do see myself as a keeper of the culture. I do this through the art metal Website.

What would you like your legacy to be?

I am a good father to my son and daughter. I've created lots of nice handcrafted metal art. A lot of it is commission art to private homes. I would like to think that these people would hold onto this furniture and not throw it away. Hopefully they will be heirlooms and passed down through generations. I do get to enjoy the work for a short period of time before it's delivered. I'm not trying to save the world but trying to make life more enjoyable to live.

Do you share your knowledge with others--the next generation of artists?

I am going to Peru to teach a workshop through a company Aceros (metal) Aerequita (city.) They have a large facility for smelting and producing iron products, mostly recycling steel from cars. Last year they were the only manufacturer in Peru. They are trying to educate Peruvian metal workers who have very little knowledge of forging. Most don't even have an anvil or forge in their shop just a welder and grinder. Aceros Aerequita gives these workshops for free. Historically they were just demos. This will be the first workshop, 39 students per day over three days.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and John C Campbell Folk School? Other?

Crafts are not a major part of University curriculum and when they are they don't teach you how to be a professional crafts person. Colleges can produce great artists that can't sell their work. There is a lack of knowledge in the general public about crafts and how things are made. Most people have no idea how things are made, they are just there. There are very few universities where you can get a degree in metalworking. Hopefully they would tell you both how to make the work and also how to sell it.

Penland has a great program.

The artist craftsman needs to learn more than just technique. They need to find ways to actually make a living from their work. That one little aspect is missing. Schools need to give the artist guidance. Although, a lot of people that go to alternative crafts schools may not have interest in going on to be a professional.

The way I learned how to be a professional was on my own. No one taught me. The business aspect is dry and yucky and has nothing to do with art but it's important to know.