

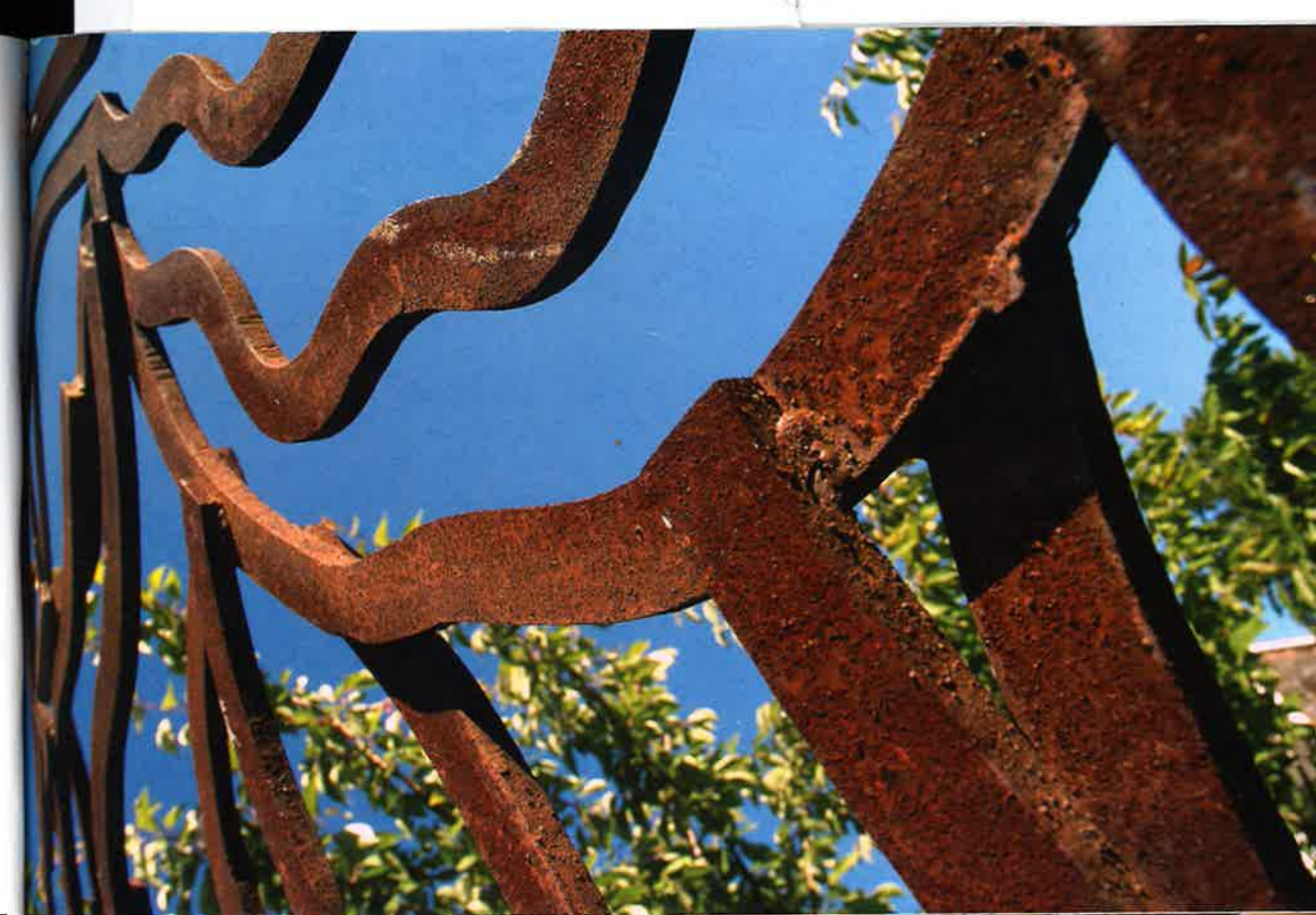
IRON IN THE FIRE

An inside look at artist and craftsman John Battle

By Susan Saiter

Plenty of people can be artists—hand them a paintbrush or a piece of clay or metal, and even throw in talent—but that doesn't guarantee making a living or finding an audience. A lot of people can be craftsmen—give them some clay or metal, a chisel or blowtorch, along with a master apprenticeship, and they may make a good living.





But put the two together—talented artist, plus a near-religious fanaticism for fine craftsmanship—and you have the ingredients for the intensely original iron and bronze work created by John Battle in his Bridgehampton shop.

John Battle is tall, thin—and buff, which isn't surprising since he spends his day pounding and hammering and wrestling with steel. While he gives off the preppy vibes of Princeton, Choate and Dartmouth, one gets the feeling that a corporate boardroom would be a prison to him and that his briefcase would be crammed with legos and puzzles rather than calculators and balance sheets. On first meeting, Battle comes off as very smart, fun to talk to, but a little possessed—there's something in his eyes that says he's listening, but it seems there's always something else trying to sneak into his mind, like how to make that wrought iron gate project back in the shop really awesome.



Decisions and Challenges

As a student, Battle encountered his first decision in the creative arena: art versus acting. Grease easily won out over greasepaint. His next aesthetic conflict was whether he was an artist or a craftsman. Craftsman won out by a mile, and he enthusiastically shows visitors around his atelier, which would be hell to a neat freak and heaven to anyone who loves garages, attics, basements,



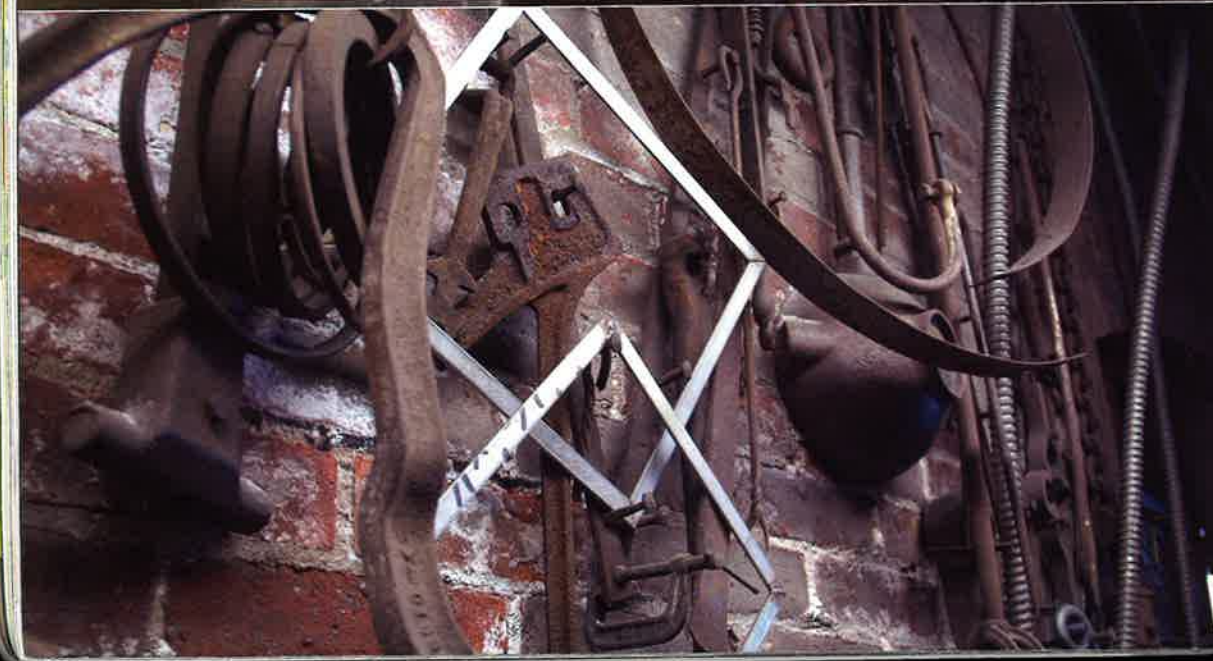
East End clients keep Battle busy in his “heaven,” hammering, torching, and brainstorming designs well into the evening with custom work orders for garden gates, furniture, fireplace screens and andirons, or pot racks and hoods for stoves. His clients, he said, expect work that is “very high end, and original,” whether it’s custom, restoration, or reproduction work.

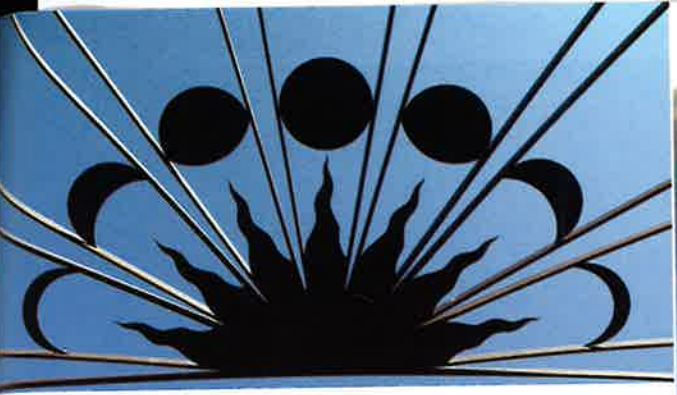
Architects come to his shop with ideas on what their clients want, and Battle welcomes the opportunity to be part of designing something unique. One has only to see the backyard bronze gazebo he designed six years ago for a customer on Daniels Lane to realize what a fantasy-come-true can do for an open space.

“I call it ‘Garden Folly,’” Battle said, surveying his 15-foot-high, 18-foot-wide bronze creation. *“The shape is what I guess you’d call half of a birdcage. But the birds fly free in and out of it.”* The structure’s curving lines are clean and modern but the decorative work is complex, with a radiant sun alongside renderings of the moon in various phases. Along with the hummingbirds and cranes and feathered species, more representations of East End wildlife—butterflies, foxes, turtles, frogs, dragonflies, deer—are a reminder that when the real moon is shining onto the sculpture, the real wildlife are frolicking through it.

One major undertaking that kept the lights burning and forges running last spring was Battle’s restoration work on gates for the Robert David Lion Gardiner estate on Main Street in East Hampton. Having to keep restoration within Landmark Preservation guidelines kept Battle busy researching historical photos to make sure he wasn’t replacing something that hadn’t originally been part of the property owned by one of the East End’s earliest settlers. Pulling out a crackled black and white photo, he points to a speck on a beautiful iron gate surrounding the mansion.

“See, that’s an iron lantern, I finally figured that out. That’s half the fun of this kind of work, making a new lantern to replace the old one, and getting it historically accurate,” he said. *“It’s fascinating work. I have to follow the guidelines of, you know, the landmark people, whatever they’re called. The work has to be done to strict standards and restored to the original quality.”*





The Early Training

While emphasizing that he is, above all, a craftsman, Battle began his career as an artist doing metal assemblage. But he soon realized that he wanted more: to get back to the essence of iron and bronze work, and to be the expert craftsman he had dreamed of being as a child, before art school intervened.

Battle grew up in Princeton, New Jersey, but he claims East End roots because the family rented for years in Sagaponack, and eventually bought a home there. The artistic community and his mother's encouragement laid the groundwork for his interest in metal. Even before high school, *"I had an interest in tools and art. It was in my system for as long as I can remember,"* he said. *"I convinced the art teacher to get welding equipment, and even though there was only one other kid in the school who was interested, she helped us out and got some."*

Battle did go to Choate, where the art room held a stronger allure than the library. *"Metal sculpture was all I would do, even then,"* he said. In addition to school, mentors influenced the young artisan. One summer he walked into the shop of Bridgehampton welder Count Strong, who repaired trucks, tractors and other farm equipment. *"I asked him for work, and he handed me a broom,"* Battle said. *"But he quickly took me under his wing, and taught me so much. And we had fun—he was always playing tricks on me, pulling pranks with the gadgets we put together."*

Battle enrolled in Dartmouth's Visual Studies Department where art education was still rather Eurocentric. But his interest turned toward the exotic art of Africa and the Pacific Islands. After college he moved to Boston and took odd jobs as a carpenter to pay the bills while he entered the art scene with metal assemblage.





"I was always assembling things—collecting things from the garbage in the neighborhood, acquiring a tremendous amount of junk," he said.

Although he was finding success and showing in galleries, Battle said, "The art I was doing lacked craftsmanship. That's what they emphasize in college art classes, so that's what I had learned." So he left for New York City and got a studio in Chelsea. To pay for it, he took on jobs where he could put a blowtorch to good use: making security window gates. "That's where I cut my teeth on blacksmithing," he said.

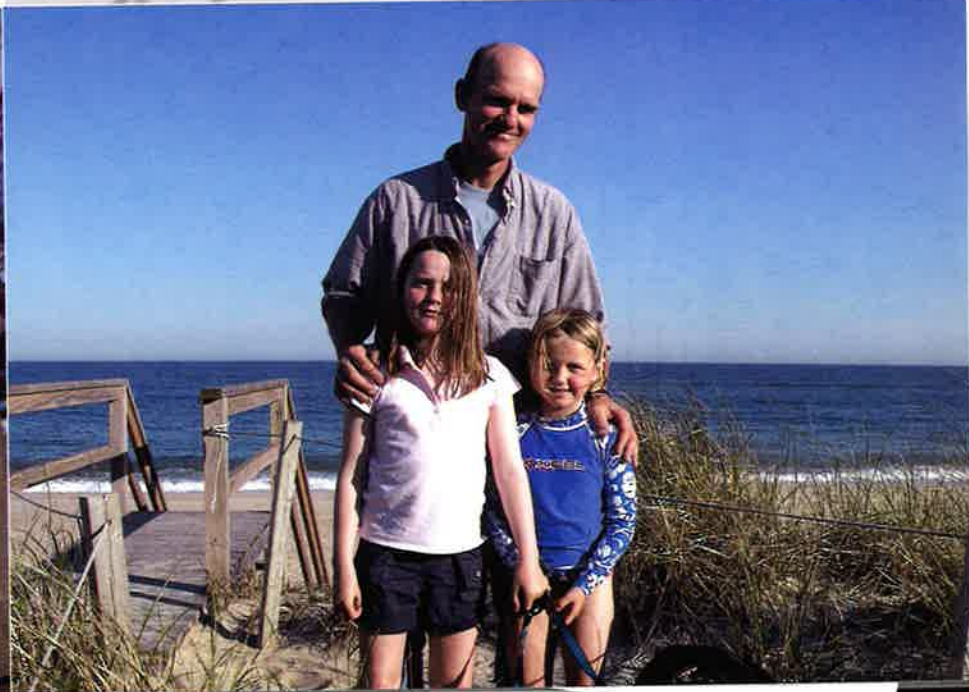
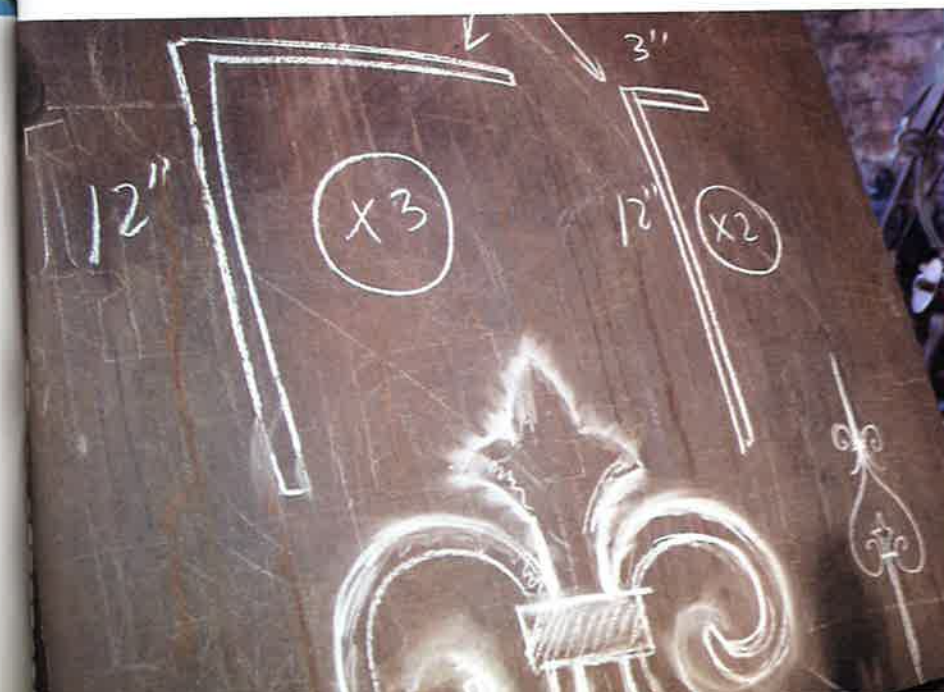
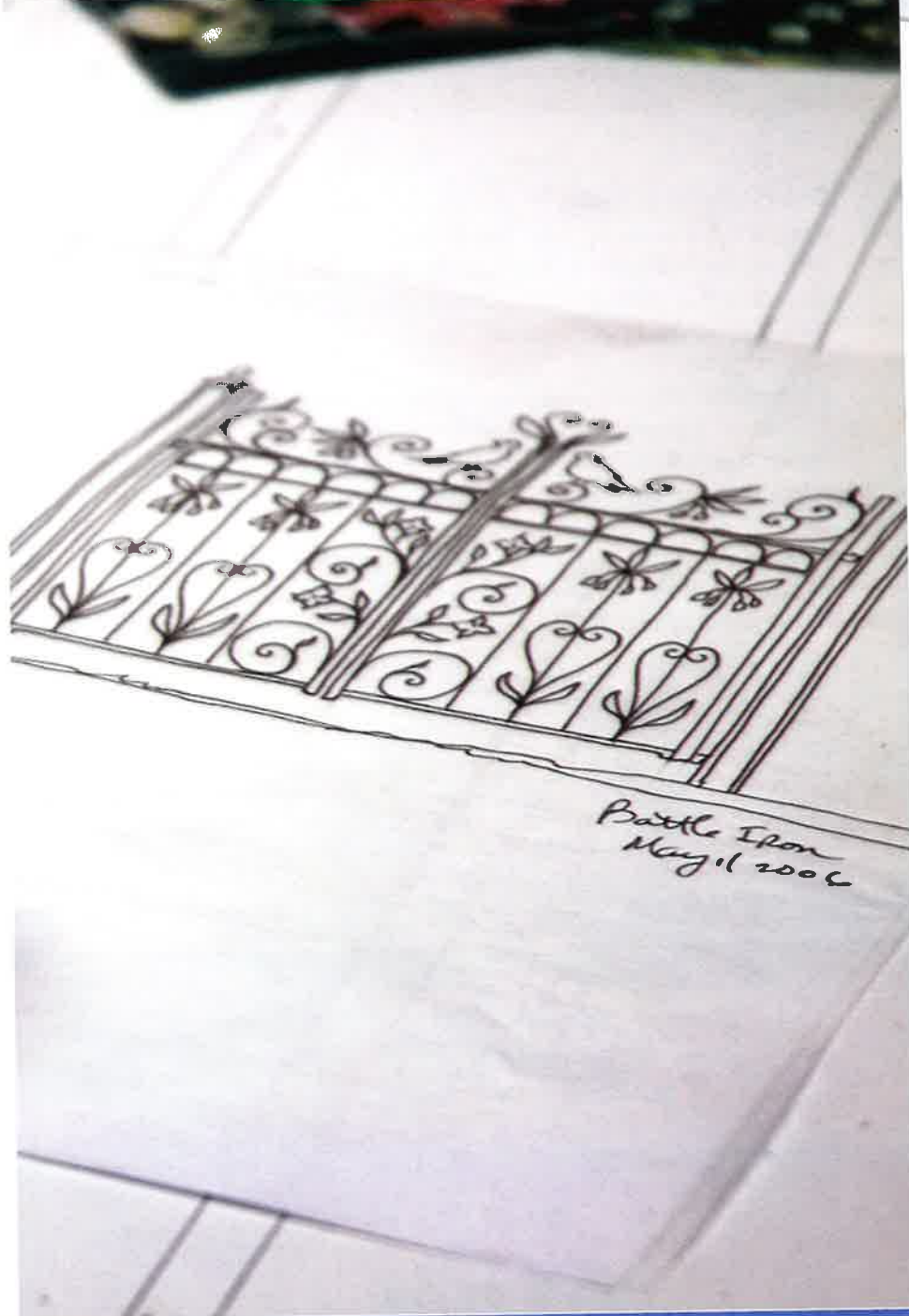
But there still had to be more to life, and to window gates, than keeping burglars out. Battle's big break came in 1982: He won the opportunity to design decorative gates for the Hispanic Society of America. "I won the job by designing it," he said, "but I had no idea at the time how to actually do it."

The challenge forced Battle to learn how to do it right, to perfect the craftsmanship and acquire the technical knowledge that he had the real passion for. "That job was like getting an 18 month grant—a year and a half of learning grid work on two gates," he said.

The Craftsman's Shop

Despite his aesthetic sensibility, Battle still considers himself a craftsman first, an artist "by avocation." In fact, he calls the brick building on Maple Lane in Bridgehampton that he has occupied since 1985, "a shop, not a studio." Part of the experience of working with Battle is visiting this 100-year old former coal and lumber operation next to the train station.

It almost feels like an auto mechanic's shop at first, from the metallic smell to the heavy cold steel and iron equipment and tools. Anvil, furnace, bellows, electric welders. But once the eye adjusts to the low light, surprises emerge: an antique weather vane. A black bird so dainty and graceful it could seem to take flight, even if it is made of a few pounds of lead. A rusting Peace



sign resting in the corner, awaiting rehab. (Were the Sixties that long ago?) A jumble of metal—no, a sculpture, an irresistible one, of a dog.

And there's his sculpture of an African woman in a grass dress, next to a sculpture he later found that was crafted by a native African, and was amazingly similar. Trellises lean against another wall, fireplace screens and andirons wait for their turn to be spiffed up and sent back home.

For Battle, whether the creation is a sculpture, something unique for a client, or a reproduction based on an architect's specifications, the approach is the same. And whether or not he would agree, it is based on the creative process, albeit a practical one.

"To get a certain quality of detail, I approach work as a problem-solver," he said. "I believe I have a whole different way of coming at a project. I like to think I can find something special in a serendipitous way."

photography by Doug Young

