

the **cottage** *journal* **AUTUMN**

55 ROOMS
WITH
*Relaxed
Comfort*

Living • Dining • Bedrooms

An Heirloom Kitchen Shines with Copper

Keeping Alive SMITHING

The art of creating metal tablewares by hand definitely suffered a setback after the Industrial Revolution when mass production of such goods became popular. But this Tennessee artisan is doing his part to keep alive the art of metalsmithing.



Today, handmade items such as tableware and utensils are a rare luxury. But there are craftsmen trying to keep alive the art of creating metal objects by hand, also known as smithing. Ben Caldwell of Nashville, Tennessee, is an example of such an artist.

Using mostly copper and sterling silver, Ben produces beautiful, handmade flatware, ladles, coffee scoops, bowls, and wall hangings that have developed a devoted following. “There are times where you need a special gift,” says Ben, “and that’s when people come to me. I provide the special thing at that birthday, anniversary, or wedding. To be incorporated into people’s lives as the person who created this special present is just really cool.”

Ben got his start in metalsmithing in 1998 when his father, a noted collector of silver and author of a book on Tennessee silver, was contacted by silversmith Terry Talley. Terry had been diagnosed with terminal lymphoma and wanted to train someone in the art of silversmithing before he died. Knowing Ben was an artist, Terry thought he might be interested. Ben immediately quit his job at Gibson building guitars and went to apprentice with Terry full-time.



Nature's influence can be found throughout Ben's work. His pieces reflect the beauty of the world and his love of simpler times.





Though he knows that his art will be used for special occasions, he designs it for everyday use in the hopes of being a part of his customers' lives, even in the smallest of ways.

In 1999, Ben & Lael Inc. was established, and Ben started selling his ladles to the public. "I expanded my pieces out from there," says Ben, "studying older designs such as traditional English and old American silver as well as Tiffany silver. I wanted to get inspiration from a time where things actually were handmade and appreciated for being so." Ben finds inspiration in nature, easily interpreting leaves or flowers into a bowl or serving spoon. He also likes to incorporate antlers into his work, an addition that pays homage to his teacher. "[Terry] used to make handles out of many different things," says Ben, "but I specifically remember finding his use of antlers to be the most interesting. So, I took his idea and I came up with my own

interpretation of that." Ben shares that antlers always make nice handles, but they are also great as a base for centerpiece-sized bowls.

Ben says of all his projects, the antler bowls are one of his favorite things to make. For his pieces such as the bowls, he uses heavy gauge copper sheets and traces one of his many designs onto the metal. After cutting the metal with shears, he then sands down and smooths all the rough edges. Using an ancient process known as "sinking," Ben forms the bowl in the hollow of a tree stump, pounding the metal to take the bowl shape. He continues to form the bowl on a mushroom-shaped metal stake, a process known as planishing, and then hammers the edges and puts the maker's mark on



the bottom. After buffing and polishing to the desired finish, the final product is reminiscent of a sculpture, says Ben.

Ben also teaches metalworking classes part-time because he wants to pass on this knowledge that he feels is so rare. He wants people to know that he creates his work the same way our ancestors did. Everything that he produces is made with his two hands, no machines ever touch a piece. When you step into his studio, you go back about 100 years technologically, and if you compare his work to a machine piece, you can tell the difference in quality and appearance.

"I make things to be used and to be beautiful," says Ben. "I like to think I am bringing beauty into people's lives." It's an old idea that people have forgotten, eating out of a beautiful spoon and taking the time to make eating a special event that you can enjoy. Ben, through his beautiful art and determination to keep the craft alive, is bringing this idea back one serving spoon at a time. □

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Though his ladles are what put Ben on the map, all of his work has garnered him a reputation of quality and beauty, establishing a group of loyal customers. Ben's biggest fans come to him for their utensil needs as well as special, commissioned pieces, where he tends to use sterling silver the most.

