



BORN TO BE WILD:

## Craftsman Copper

**W**HILE PERUSING THE ELEGANT hand-hammered lamps, sconces and chandeliers that are the heart and soul of **Craftsman Copper**, you'll be reminded of the works of Dirk Van Erp. What you won't envision are tattoos, choppers or punk rock bands. That is, until you meet James K. Davies. A study in contradictions, James is a "bit of a black sheep" who also happens to be a very talented coppersmith with an abiding respect for the Arts and Crafts tradition. His meticulous work has earned the admiration of collectors like film director George Lucas and fellow chopper aficionado Jesse James, who recently visited Davies's Olympia, Wash., studio. But when you get right down to it, it isn't the tattoos that matter, but the hand that swings the hammer. And James Davies has one talented set of hands.

Coppersmithing is a notable occupation—especially for a man whose aspirations ranged from becoming a recording engineer to a cartoonist. But the one certainty James felt about his future was that, whatever the occupation, it would be in a creative field. Born in Everett to a globe-trotting Boeing executive, six-year-old James first felt the urge to create when his family moved to Spain, where he began speaking like a native and drawing everything in sight. A few



years later, back in the U.S., he soon discovered he loved drawing hot-rod cartoons. Early on and without formal training, he developed an uncanny ability to draw three-dimensional images.

"I didn't realize it then, but I was always interested in designing machines, bridges, architecture."

When the family moved to Oak Ridge, Tenn., James discovered skateboarding and punk rock, an influences that would never leave him. In his senior year of high school, he found himself back in Washington, enrolled in several high-caliber art classes.

After high school, he studied sound engineering while singing in a band. (He soon found he much preferred being on the microphone side.) He headed to Evergreen State College in Olympia to become an animator. But it was one particular drawing, sculpture and design course that changed everything when a faculty member was impressed with Jamie's ability to draw three-dimensionally.

"He was impressed that I could take these ideas I had in my head and draw them three-dimensionally on paper. He suggested that I take it a step further and turn them into sculpture."

He did just that, using materials he found at the scrapyards: metal, wood, glass and even bone. He tended to create "usable sculpture" re-purposing chairs and tables.

### Falling in Love with Copper

When he graduated, James went to work at Evergreen Studios with master coppersmith Michael Ashford. Having never heard of Arts and Crafts, Jamie fell in love with the work.





“It really hit me the second I started working with copper—I really liked the way copper would move, how it was almost like clay. This metal that bends, it’s fluid, you can do so many things with it. It’s just so malleable.”

As Jamie honed his skills, he developed an enormous respect for the artisans of the Arts and Crafts era.

“Van Erp is my specialty... definitely what I work toward, to be the best. He was the master—an originator.”

Like many modern craftspeople, James enjoys creating his own designs as well as recreating the designs of the masters.

“It’s just so satisfying to create something out of my mind, put it down on a piece of paper, and then sit down with three-dimensional materials and make it a reality. But it’s also very gratifying to do the closest interpretation of a Van Erp lamp that I’m capable of doing. The challenge for modern craftspeople is the finish. His pieces are 100 years old now. In a hundred years, maybe mine will look like that, but then his will be 200 years old. What will his finishes look like then?”

### Forging his Own Path

Eventually, with encouragement from his wife, James opened his own shop.

“I had questions about my own ability—is this a good idea? Is this smart? She said, ‘You know, you are really good at what you do. If you don’t do it, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.’”

Though James the rebel is now a respected craftsman, he still sings with a couple of bands and plays with his hot rods and choppers (though he’s the only guy in the band with a hammer tattoo, and one of his choppers will soon be sporting a hand-hammered copper gas tank).

“I guess I’m the black sheep at trade shows,” he laughs, “but the other craftspeople still like to talk to me. Look at George Ohr (the ‘Mad Potter of Biloxi’). He was a freak. But he was an originator.”



Jamie enjoys his life and his work, and is immensely grateful to his wife for being willing to take the leap of faith with him.

“I owe her a lot...the satisfaction of being able to work with my hands, to make a living working for myself, working with customers, creating my own designs. It’s the best. It’s everything.”



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