

Missouri Folk Arts Program

Lisa L. Higgins
Director

Missouri Folk Arts was thrilled in September 2019 to curate a small exhibition at Mizzou North about Colombian folkloric dance and the Carnival of Barranquilla. Master dancer, choreographer, and costume designer Carmen S. Dence selected and loaned objects from her personal collection, including the spectacular “story dress” that she designed. She also joined MFA Director Lisa Higgins to discuss and demonstrate Colombian dance and culture during Museum Day in October (see Educator’s report).

In early 2020, MFA will curate a second small exhibition—this one a version of a 2019 collaboration with Mid-America Arts Alliance and ExhibitsUSA, which featured works by members of the Blacksmiths Association of Missouri (BAM!). BAM members, via their guild, practice a tradition thousands of years old. In 1983, a dozen founding members established BAM, now boasting over five hundred members from Missouri and beyond.

“During the early years, BAM was just a small group that included several excellent blacksmiths. We would gather at members’ shops and share what we knew. Instead of observing a demonstration [monthly] by the host blacksmith like we do today, we all worked the forges and gained hands-on experience as we were taught.” Bernard Tappel, Osage Bluff Blacksmith Shop, Jefferson City, Mo.

Blacksmiths produce a diverse range of creative products using the same basic processes: heat coal in a forge; heat metal over the coal; hammer heated metal on an anvil; and repeat often to form objects. With their basic tools (anvil, hammers, tongs, vices, and chisels), as well as more elaborate and substantive power hammers, skilled blacksmiths

can repair or create just about anything from metals: functional tools and utensils, decorative knives and fishing gigs, architectural hardware, ornamental furniture, whimsical signs, and ornate sculptures.

“I have made towel bars, heat registers, and a stair railing for my son’s house. I have made hinges and door handles for many log cabin restorations in the [Washington, Mo.] area. I have made colonial cookware for Thornhill Estate at Faust Park in St. Louis and Christmas ornaments for the Missouri Governor’s Mansion in Jefferson City. I practice my craft every day in my shop and at events in the community.” Pat McCarty, Washington Forge, Washington, Mo.

Blacksmiths rarely find themselves employed full-time today at the center of their local hamlets, but 21st century smiths still find themselves in demand;

their place in local communities has evolved. Instead of a centrally located shop, most smiths create from home workshops, folk schools, guilds, private businesses, and living history sites. They may work solo, in pairs, in



Pat McCarty (Washington, Mo.) loves to forge leaves from different metals.



BAM member Mike McLaughlin (Lawson, Mo.) displayed his anvil and tools for visiting folklorist Thomas Grant Richardson.



Previous apprentice Matthew Burnett (Kidder, Mo.) heats up coal at his Missouri School of Blacksmithing.



Recent apprentice Lisa Thompson (Ste. Genevieve, Mo.) bends a hook during a “hammer in” at the Historic Lohman Landing.

formal or informal apprenticeships, or in groups. Depending on the occasion, goals, and products, blacksmiths are likely to work in more than one of these locations and scenarios.

“Blacksmithing [via BAM] brings people together from all walks of life, skill, and knowledge levels—and into fellowship with one another. This is done in an environment of willingness to share knowledge and expertise for the betterment of the craft, be it for hobby, traditional, or commercial applications.” Matthew Burnett, Missouri School of Blacksmithing, Cameron, Mo.

Through Missouri’s Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP), sixteen blacksmiths have taught over thirty apprentices between 1986 and 2019. Both the National Endowment for the Arts and Missouri Arts Council, a division of the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, have provided grant funds for TAAP since its inception thirty-five years ago. With the small exhibition to open in early 2020, MFA plans to showcase both functional and creative works from a few recent TAAP artists and BAM members. ■



Bernard Tappel (Jefferson City, Mo.) uses a drill on a decorative cross he forged during a “hammer in” in the Kansas City Crossroads.



Bob Alexander (DeSoto, Mo.) crafts a range of objects, including sculptures like this fish.

Photos by Deborah A. Bailey, Thomas Grant Richardson, and Lisa L. Higgins

