

Design and
Craftsmanship
in **M**etals



the **C**reative **A**rt
of **O**scar **B**ach

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the Creative Art
of Oscar Bach

by Matlack Price



The inner door of the club rooms of the Architectural League of New York is a thoroughly characteristic piece of design and craftsmanship in metal. This dignified door, of hand-wrought forged iron, is set in jambs of the same material and technique, with bronze symbolic figures inset. The bas-relief seal of the Architectural League, set above the door, is also of bronze.

Design and Craftsmanship in Metals



The maker of models and patterns—a craftsman who has worked for fifteen years with Oscar Bach.

IN RENAISSANCE ITALY they would have called him *maestro*. He is a creative artist, Oscar Bach, and a designer and craftsman essentially of today, with a background as rich in old tradition as a mediaeval tapestry, so that I find myself writing, in this material age, a story of the Middle Ages, with something of Renaissance Italy—and about a man of our own times, a man essentially modern in his spirit, in his point of view and in his work.

But first looking back, as one must, a few years, there is the young craftsman—ardent, eager—travelling, discovering and studying rare examples of art in out-of-the-way corners of Italy and Spain. This young man made thorough researches into old methods, re-discovered the forgotten skill of master artificers of past ages. And out of all this he evolved the style which is entirely his own, and of which he is now known as the distinguished master. Knowing the old, he has earned not only the ability but the right to evolve new expressions, to build on the foundation of the past a new creative art, fashioned in metals, with consummate craft.

With the courage of his own individual convictions as a designer, he reminds us that the old, beautiful things we admire could not have been made if the designer-craftsmen of the past had not, themselves, had the courage of their convictions. It is because this is so that he is creating true works of art in metal that are as sound and beautiful intrinsically as the works of the great periods of art in the crafts, and which will hold the same message for future ages as the works of the past hold for us today.

Works of art are definite expressions of the culture of periods and of peoples, and culture is cumulative, a product of centuries. Behind Oscar Bach there are nine hundred years of art, of craft,

of science in his own family—and with it, inevitably, the creative urge—that thing which must express itself, which must find release in artistic achievement.

There will be few to deny that the age in which we live is essentially a material one, and that for all the increased prosperity which machines have brought to pass, art has come to count for less.

Oscar Bach utilizes twentieth century tools because he is working



A desk of wood with original hand-wrought metal mounts and underbracing. Based on the old Renaissance varguenos of Spain, its treatment in design and technique bespeaks the craftsman.



A hand-forged bracket of iron, unusual in design and vigorous in its execution—a piece that suggests the very spirit of forge and anvil.

in the twentieth century. They give him greater facility and greater effectiveness because he uses them intelligently and is always their master, never allowing them to overpower individuality. The "personal equation" becomes lost in the machine's uniformity of technique, and in the compromises enforced by volume production. And the machine, too, induces repetition—often, unfortunately, not the repetition of good designs.

From the first it is important to appreciate the scope of the metal-worker's craft, involving as it does theory, practice and

history in the fashioning and combining mainly of iron, bronze and silver.

In practice there are the *formative* processes of casting and forging, of chasing, joining, sanding, graining, texturing and bur-nishing, after which there are the



Hand forging, one of the oldest and most virile of the crafts, practiced today as it was centuries ago, except that the electric blower has supplanted the old bellows.

The chaser at work—a craftsman whose art is akin to that of the jeweller. With special tools, dies and stamps he embellishes the more intricate parts of the work.

decorative processes of enamelling, niello work, damascening and gilding.

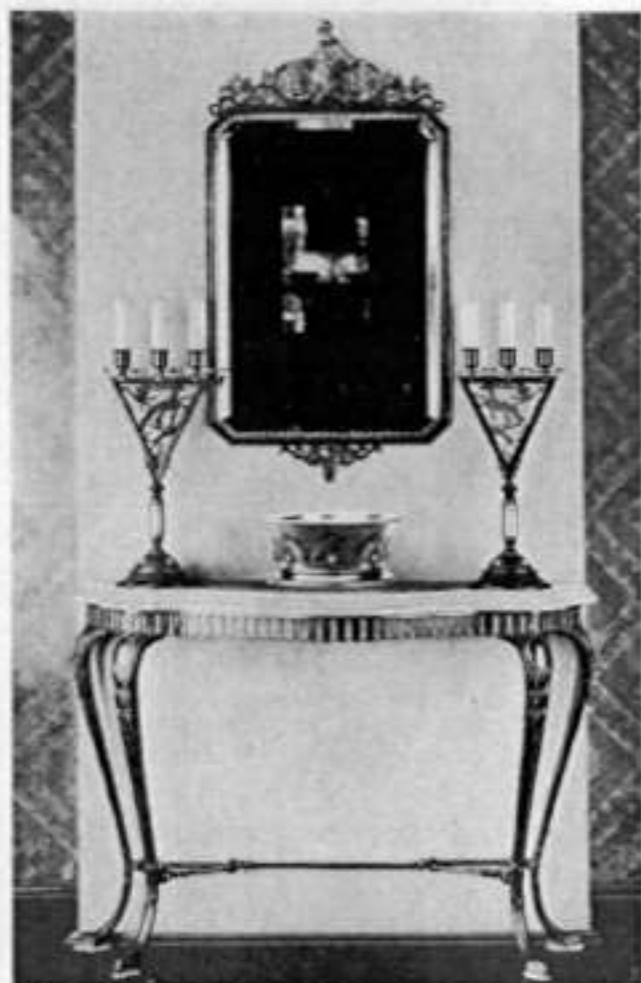
Iron, from its nature, suggests the structural phase of design and making; bronze lends itself to casting and chasing, while silver, more precious than either, is found in delicate inlays or in damascened treatments.

The past is rich in examples of design and craftsmanship in metals, and it is through appreciation of these that any sound critical appraisal must be made of metal-work today.

The vigor and the perfect suitability of the metal-work of the Middle Ages resulted not only from the fact that designer and maker were the same man, but from the more intimate contact of the craftsman with the building of which his work became a part.



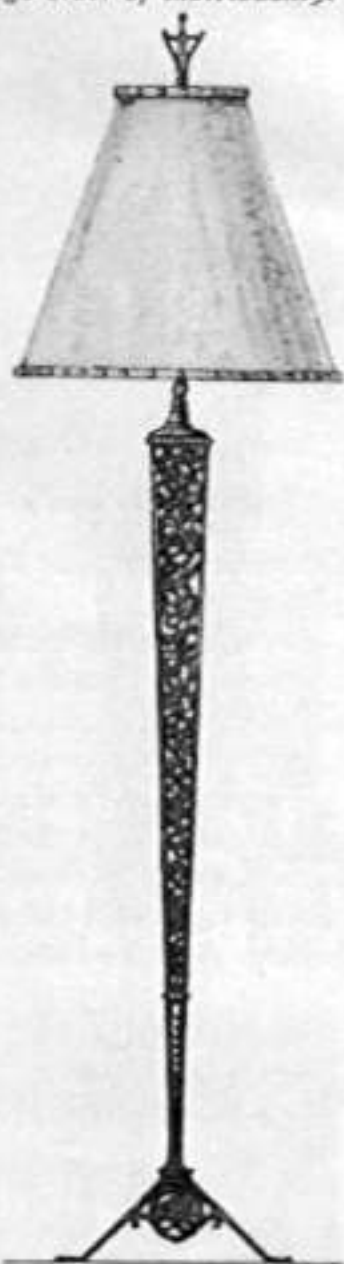
A small coffer of bronze and enamel, its design an interesting blend of architectural and sculptural qualities carried out with beautiful finesse of scale.



A group of original designs in hand-wrought metal. The candlesticks and mirror in wrought bronze, the console of iron, with a special inlaid marble top, and the bowl of gilt-bronze and acid-corroded copper, with hand-made glass, represent a high order of individuality.

And in the era of the Renaissance there was the same identity of designer and maker. With the great craftsmen of that period one could not say whether the designers were master artificers or the artificers were master designers.

One Abbé Texier put this aptly when he wrote: "In the Middle Ages art and manufacture were blended and identified; art gained by this affinity great practical facility and manufacture much original beauty." And he might have said the same of the Renaissance, for such, certainly, is the essential basis of the production, through craftsmanship, of works of art.

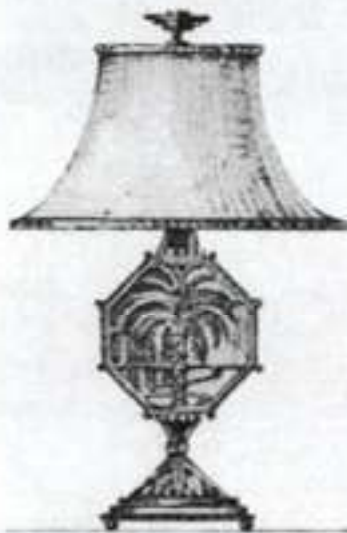


Striking metal craftsmanship in an unusual hand-forged iron lamp, with open tracery of bronze set in the forged frame.

A composite of bronze and hand-made glass, a design in which the modern spirit is vigorously expressed in exceptional craftsmanship. The same element of originality in this design is equally apparent in the bronze and enamel lamp illustrated below.



Welding, an essential process in the craftsmanship of ironwork from the earliest times, accomplished today by the twentieth century electric method.



In his "Bases of Design," Walter Crane calls design of ironwork "a strictly conditioned kind of design," and one which "owes its character and peculiar beauty to the necessities and limitations of the material and mode of working." And he considers "that the designer in iron has a material to deal with which is capable, under heat and the hammer, of obeying much invention and lines of grace and beauty." Crane, if he were alive today, would find, in the works of Oscar Bach, a knowledge of structure and a mastery of technique that seems to transcend what he had called the "conditions" of the material, and achieve infinite "invention" and an unrestricted expression of "grace and beauty," combined with that feeling of essential strength that designs in

iron must invariably express. Of all materials, iron is an exceptionally good illustration of the essential unity of material and method as factors that govern design.

And the strength of the material carries with it the related idea of imperishable permanency which is a joy to the craftsman as it is to the possessor of a work of art in metal.



This illustration shows a detail of one panel of a metal screen, shown in full on the opposite page. The designing and execution of this screen took a year to complete, and eight different methods were employed in its making. The frame and cresting are of wrought iron, the solid panels of etched and inlaid steel, the base of the ornamental panels of hand-cut steel and the ornamentation was carried out in repousse, intarsia, applique, chased bronze and vitreous enamel.

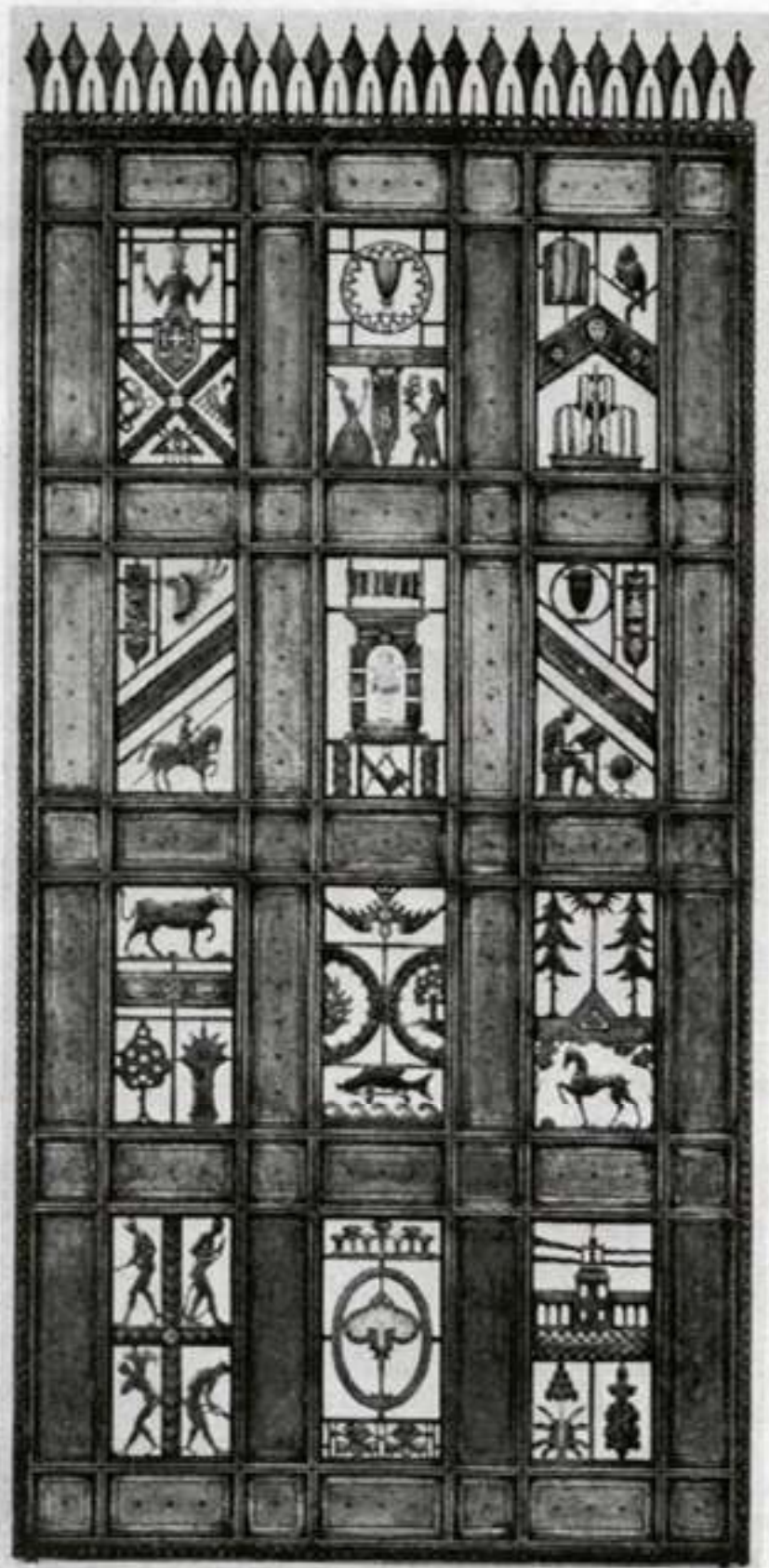


The process by which cut steel panels such as those in the screen illustrated are fashioned by hand.

The really remarkable diversity of Oscar Bach's artistry in metal comes from the fact that he considers not only the elementary structure of his materials, but also their workable possibilities as deducible from human processes of manufacture and as related to works of past masters. The craft is rich in traditions, and because these traditions are created by the inherent nature of metals and their working, they are as vital today as they were in the earliest periods of metal craftsmanship. Fire, hammer and anvil are still essential factors.

In the Middle Ages and, later, in the Renaissance, fine craftsmanship seems to have been appreciated and the craftsman was a man of importance and, indeed, of distinction.

In Renaissance Italy there were master craftsmen too numerous to mention in compass so small as the present pages—such men as Caradosso, as Ghiberti, of the gates of San Giovanni Battista in Florence and, greatest of them all, Benvenuto Cellini, who could express the most delicate jeweller's artistry in the fashioning of small and precious things and impart the same finesse, in a





This illustration shows a detail of one panel of a door shown in full on the page opposite. The framework of the door is of heavy oak with bands of iron applique and the figures are of bronze. The figures are largely symbolic, and are designed with a fine spirit of freedom. This door was designed and made for the residence of Mr. W. E. Scripps, at Orion, Michigan, and is an exceptional piece of design and craftsmanship.

greater scale, and the same mastery of design and execution to works of architectural magnitude.

The spirit of the true designer-craftsman is the spirit that must make a fire-iron as finely and as beautifully as a cathedral altar-screen. It is the spirit that is moved by "how finely," not "how easily" a thing may be made.

It is fortunate that even in this age of the machine, a real designer and craftsman need not be a voice crying in the wilderness that such a one need not be without appreciation and recognition. Appreciation and recognition should, it is true, be wider and more general, but with a constantly growing public consciousness of the true meaning of design and craftsmanship, this will develop.

Meanwhile, standards of taste in general, and of taste that appreciates, specifically, really good design and good craftsmanship,



A lighting fixture of unusual design, made in wrought iron, with special glassware.





This illustration shows a detail of one panel of a door shown in full on the page opposite. It is the door to the treasure room of Christ Church, Cranbrook, Michigan, and is massively constructed on a design of the finest simplicity. The figures are of repousse steel, inlaid with silver and gold.

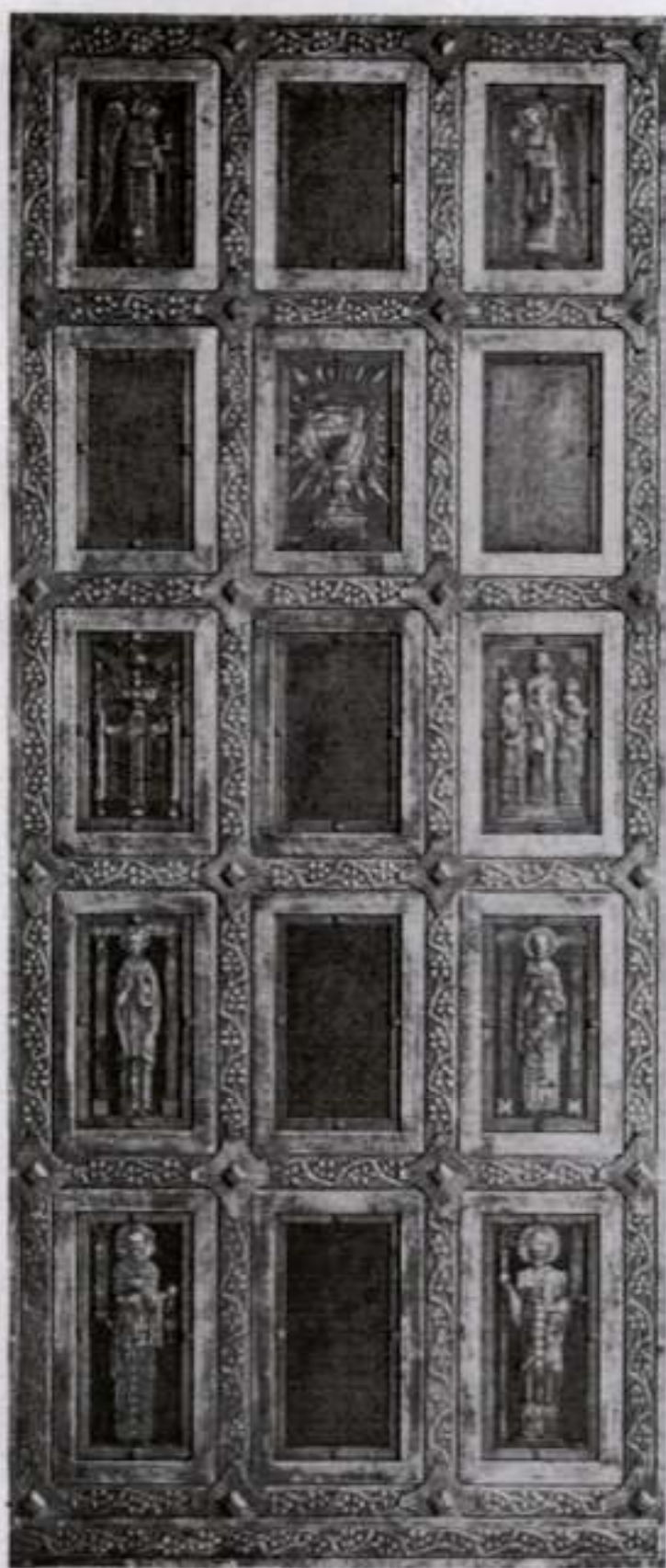
are forcefully upheld by the architects, representing as they do the trained mind which is capable of discriminating between good and poor work in all those arts closely allied to architecture.

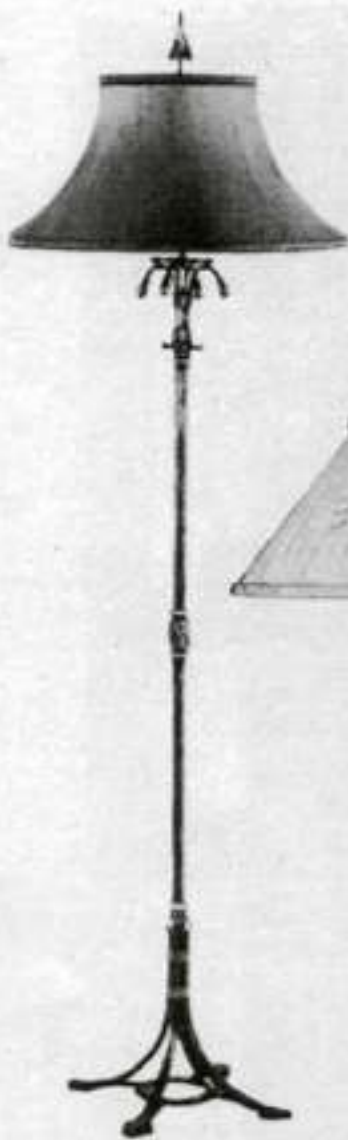
And of all the allied arts none is more essentially a part of architecture than metal-work. In character, scale, beauty and interest, doors, grilles, railings and lighting fixtures can make or mar an architectural project. The allied arts, since they are ornamental, and since they are more understandable to the public than the abstract architectural qualities of a building, afford one of the architect's greatest opportunities. In demanding the finest design and craftsmanship of his time, the architect not only does credit to his own good taste and his own standards of practice, but conspicuously aids the further development of fine design and craftsmanship in the arts allied to architecture.

The architect's recognition of this craftsmanship in metals



One of a number of original designs for wall lanterns in finely wrought iron.

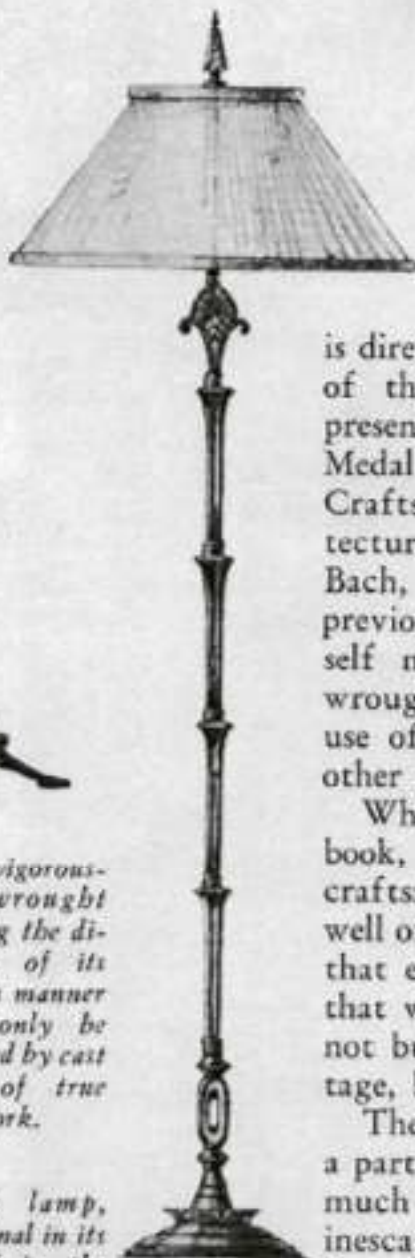




A lamp of vigorously hand-wrought iron, bearing the direct marks of its forging in a manner that can only be counterfeited by cast imitations of true wrought work.

A bronze lamp, highly original in its design, and in the individual concept of its striking black and gold finish.

A table lamp of bronze, with an original treatment in pewter and brass finish—a design suggestive equally of grace and strength.



is directly expressed in the language of the award accompanying the presentation to him, in 1926, of the Medal of Honor in Design and Craftsmanship given by the Architectural League of New York: "Mr. Bach, by his exhibits at this and previous exhibitions, has shown himself most skillful not only with wrought iron, but also in the happy use of iron with brass, silver and other metals."

When I was asked to write this book, I felt that fine design and craftsmanship, as a subject, might well offer an opportunity not unlike that enjoyed by the architect, and that whatever I might write could not but be enhanced, to its advantage, by the nature of the subject.

The man, naturally, is so much a part of his work, and his work so much a part of him that there is an inescapable feeling of the same perfect unity which is felt by a sensitive person in looking at mediaeval or Renaissance works of art.



A torchere of wrought iron, with applique of hand-cut brass and bronze. The base is of hand-carved marble, done in Venice, and the translucent bowl is of hand-made glass, specially designed and fashioned as a part of this graceful ensemble of five different materials.



In these varied works there is not only the impression of mastery of design in various materials and techniques, but of a vital human joy in the mastery. There is the feeling that this man would rather dream and make beautiful things in metal than do anything else—and this is, indeed, the fact.

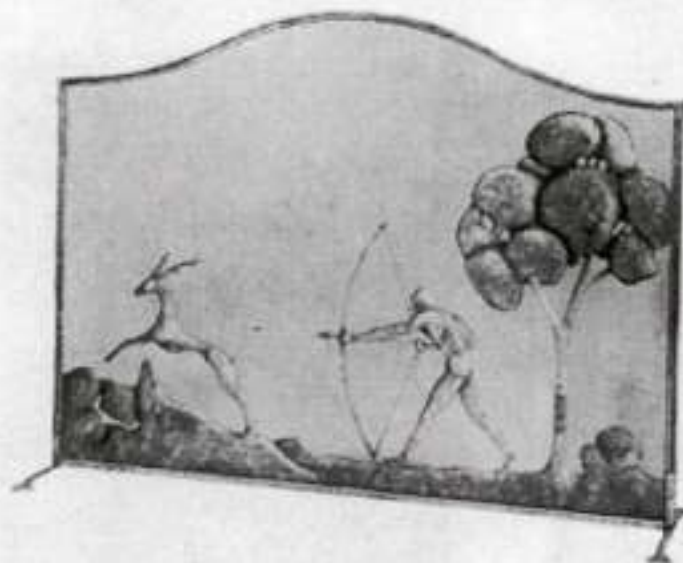
He believes, naturally, that design is fundamentally important, and with him design is a direct expression of the creative spirit given form by his thorough knowledge of materials, methods and techniques, and of the old traditions of his craft.

He feels that design must be creative and expressive as well as good, and that copying is an obvious admission of inability to create. He has not sought to copy the craftsmanship of any land or any age, believing that the present age should leave its mark upon our art by creating its own period.

The hand of the master technician is seen in Oscar Bach's ready use of two, three or even four different

The assembling of a stair-rail of forged iron and bronze, with a detail of one of the units of the design. Each interlaced finial is different, and all were modelled directly on the anvil.



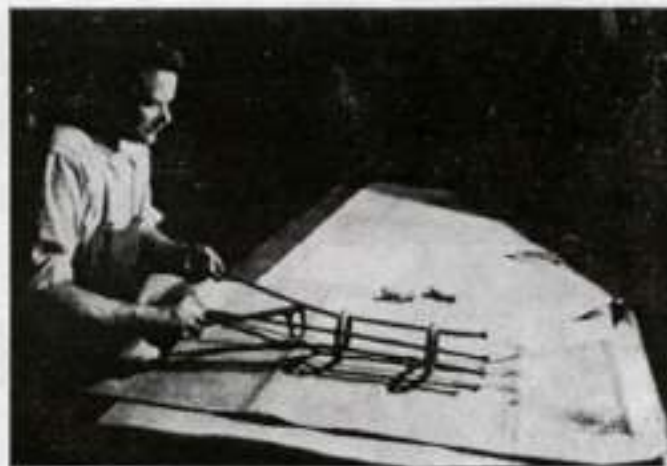


An original fire-screen in which repousse steel is set over a mesh of non-rusting steel net, with a frame and base of hand-forged iron.

metals in one piece of work—not to speak of brilliant vitreous enamels. And in the creation of furniture, in which wood and metal are combined, he has demonstrated himself, again, as a highly individualistic designer.

I believe it was Ruskin who said that true works of art, made as finely as befit works of art, cannot ever be made cheaply. If the attempt is made to make them cheaply, they would not be so honest as things frankly produced in quantity by machine methods. Even more in our time than ever before, the human equation of actual handwork gives added value in quality and character—a truth that is gradually becoming known by the public. There is something inherent in the uniqueness and interest of hand-made things that will always defeat the combined effort of all the machines in the world. There is apparent, in the works of Oscar Bach, every evidence of actual genius, including "the infinite capacity for taking pains." In Renaissance Italy they would have called him *maestro*.

The designs are fully developed in full-size detail drawings, with which the actual work is checked from time to time during the processes of its making.



One of many distinguished designs for andirons. This one is chosen as a striking example of the vigorous yet subtle technique of hand-forged iron.

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