



TOM JOYCE

The Art of Iron

Interview by Kevin Conru

FIG. 1 (left):
Tom Joyce forging a sculpture
in a factory outside Chicago.
Photo © Anne-Marie Bouttiaux.



Tom Joyce is a MacArthur Foundation Fellow, artist, and designer whose artworks are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York City; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Minneapolis Institute of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts–Boston; and the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, New York City. The study of African metalworking is a passion of his and has to some degree informed his artistic practice, which itself was fueled by early training in the art of forging iron. I visited him in his studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where we talked about various aspects of his career as an artist and about an exhibition he's co-curated for UCLA's Fowler Museum, *Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths*, opening this summer in Los Angeles, California.

Kevin Conru: *You're an artist who works with metal, which has been your medium of artistic expression almost since the beginning of your career. Would you tell us how that started?*

Tom Joyce: I began learning how to forge iron in El Rito, New Mexico, in an informal apprenticeship at age fourteen. I was given the keys to the shop at sixteen and eventually opened my studio in Santa Fe in 1977. My sculpture is made primarily there and in a factory outside Chicago, whereas a design studio in Brussels provides space to plan larger public art projects and to develop maquettes, drawings, photographs, and video.

K. C.: *So your first training was as a functional blacksmith?*



FIG. 2 (center left):
Tom Joyce outside his adobe
studio in Santa Fe.
Photo © Christopher Sturman.

FIG.3 (bottom left):
Tom Joyce sculpture
installation at the Center for
Contemporary Arts, Santa
Fe.

Left: *Datum II*, forged stainless steel, 203 cm, 2,744 kg.
Right: *Datum I*, forged stainless steel, 190 cm, 2,277 kg.
Background: *Decalence*, forged stainless steel, 4 pieces (2 visible), dim. variable, 7,228 kg.

Photo © Daniel Barsotti.



T. J.: Yes, I wanted to learn forging skills from the ground up, so I produced and repaired tools and a wide variety of useful objects for my neighbors in this small farming community and for others living in surrounding villages. Though I knew I would ultimately use the medium as an art form, I felt it was important first to learn the trade through its practical aspects so I could more freely and confidently reapply these techniques toward exploratory and experimental means in order to find my own direction when I was ready.



K. C.: *Why did you choose forged iron as your primary medium?*

T. J.: Before I was introduced to blacksmithing, I learned how to throw pots on a wheel and work with clay. When I first began working iron, I realized that at a white-hot temperature iron can be manipulated just like clay. Anything I could model in clay, I could also shape in iron using hammers, punches, and chisels to arrive at a desired form. I believe it was this seemingly improbable contrast of hard and soft, hot and cold, intractable and forgiving qualities of forging iron that lured me in.



FIG. 4 (above left): Tom Joyce sculpture installation at the Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe.

Left: *Bloom IV*, forged high carbon steel, 107 cm, 7,144 kg.

Right: *Bloom V*, forged high carbon steel, 140 cm, 12,163 kg.

Background: *Cypher I*, forged high carbon steel, 137 cm. wide, 340 kg, and *Cypher II*, forged high carbon steel, 142 cm. wide, 358 kg.

Photo © Daniel Barsotti.

FIG. 5 (above): View of Tom Joyce's home office in Santa Fe.

Photo © Tom Joyce Studio Archive.



K. C.: *You've expanded the boundaries of blacksmithing as an art form as evidenced by the national and international awards and recognitions you've received, but it's far from typical. How would you describe what you're doing?*

T. J.: Even though I now make my living exclusively as a sculptor, my origins as a blacksmith provide the connective tissue toward thought processes and solutions that are an inextricable part of my practice as an artist. In fact, without these skills, it would've been impossible to have gained access to the state-of-the-art

FIG. 6 (above): Objects on a table in Tom Joyce's home office.
Photo © Tom Joyce Studio Archive.

FIG. 7 (below left): Male initiate playing an *ekpande* bell at an initiation ceremony. Kuwde, Togo, 2010.
Photo © Tom Joyce.

FIG. 8 (below): Kabre blacksmiths Kao Kossi and Ide Essozimna forging an *ekpande*. Tcharé, Togo, 2010.
Photo © Tom Joyce.

industrial forging facility in Illinois where, for the last fifteen years, I've created the large-scale works, some pieces weighing in excess of 20,000 kilos. It's precisely because we speak the same fundamental language in this context that I'm offered a seamless working environment allowing hands-on orchestration as if I'm working in my own studio, but with the aid of their industrially scaled equipment.

Another advantage of producing my work there is that it provides a means of keeping my finger on the pulse of global political and economic conditions driving this industry. They furtively facilitate indispensable tasks that provide a staggering array of goods and services that human beings rely on. Blacksmiths have been doing this for more than 3,000 years. They continue to do so but are simply out of public view now, performing with astonishing technological innovations inside industrial facilities that are closed to outsiders. By forging sculpture from their massive remnants, literally hot-off-the-press and acknowledging each piece as "offspring" still metaphorically connected to its "parent" material, I reference our dependency on forging activities that remain at the cutting edge of our lives. In every way imaginable, forged components are churning away at the heart of energy production, cultivation and processing of food, extraction of mineral resources, protection of borders, and even the exploration of our galaxy. Our debt to these blacksmith/technicians and



problem solvers, in essence the descendants of the earliest tool makers, artists, and inventors, is unparalleled in our time.

K. C.: *After all these years, you've obviously come across other traditions of working metal around the world. From what I see in your collection, Africa plays a large role. Why Africa?*

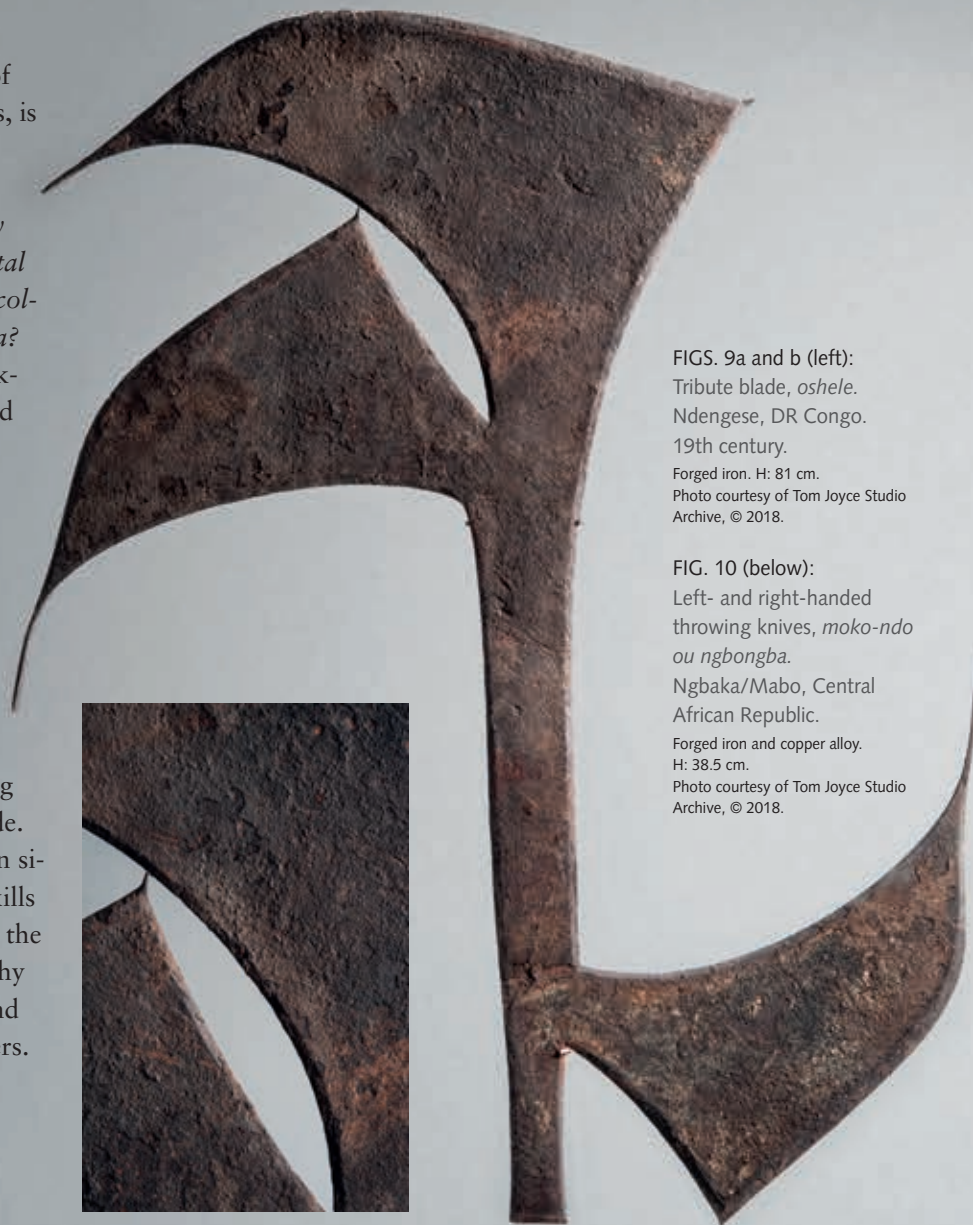
T. J.: Almost from the moment I began working with iron, I was curious to find out if and where in the world blacksmiths were still considered indispensable inside the communities in which they worked. In Africa I learned that they were absolutely essential to the health of contemporary life, not only by providing the tools and implements used on a daily basis but also by forging an impressive display of musical instruments, ritual objects, and body adornment and by offering other services only blacksmiths could provide.

The fact that African blacksmiths are often simultaneously revered and feared for their skills was also intriguing. The more I understood, the more affinity I felt for the working philosophy I encountered when forging methodology and design ideas were shared among African peers.

K. C.: *Tell us about your first trip to Africa.*

T. J.: Though I had visited the continent for other reasons years before, my first journey specifically to visit artists and blacksmiths was to Ghana and Togo in 2008. This began an open-ended survey to learn more about blacksmiths working in different regions. A friend and collaborator, Steve Feld, an ethnomusicologist teaching at the University of New Mexico at the time, joined me in southern Togo to film and record the creation of a *gangokui*—a clapperless double bell—by Ewe smiths Galbert Atakpa and Hodenou Noglo in Yohonou, a community known for its making of musical instruments and Vodun ritual objects.

During each encounter, I as an outsider was relieved to be so graciously welcomed into blacksmiths' shops. What was readily apparent to all of us was that our common professional knowledge allowed us to exchange ideas inside our chosen medium and we had much to share.



FIGS. 9a and b (left):
Tribute blade, *oshele*.
Ndengese, DR Congo.
19th century.

Forged iron. H: 81 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

FIG. 10 (below):
Left- and right-handed
throwing knives, *moko-ndo*
ou ngbongba.

Ngbaka/Mabo, Central
African Republic.

Forged iron and copper alloy.
H: 38.5 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.



K. C.: *When did you start collecting African art?*

T. J.: Santa Fe has many ethnographic art dealers and a flea market that was once international in scope. In the early 1980s, people from all over the world arrived with exceptional art and artifacts for sale. The first piece of African iron I encountered was a Mumuye bar currency called *tajere*, which is made from folded layers of worn-out hoes. It's a simple yet elegant shape, and when I bought it in 1982, neither I nor the seller had a clue what it was. While researching it, I ran across Ekpo Eyo's 1979 book *Nigeria and the Evolution of Money* and learned that *tajere* was a "bride wealth" trade token of great importance. The fact that it was made from a specific repurposed material struck a chord with me because when I began blacksmithing in El Rito, which lacked resources available in larger cities, iron was considered quite valuable. My clients usually brought their own iron—scrap they had judiciously saved—to the shop for me to work with. This frugal mindedness reflected a deep-seated, historically relevant remnant of the Spanish settlers who had arrived there when iron was scarce and expensive that far north of the smelting centers in south central Mexico during the colonial era. I respected the notion that the prior history of a material could be reinvested into a new object, and even today in many places around

the world, Africa included, iron is believed to amplify its importance, power, and prestige through its deliberate use and reuse over time.

Searching for a deeper understanding of the objects I've encountered has sustained my interest in the art of Africa for thirty-six years. This same lesson of instructive reuse has played a definite role in my own work throughout my career.

K. C.: *I notice that your collection consists of multiple examples of particular object types. What is it that draws you to multiples in your collection?*

T. J.: I enjoy observing the subtle differences within a family of like objects. In addition to appreciating variations in design and innovation, one can read the handwork of a smith by looking carefully at his output. For example, one can determine if the blacksmith had a confident hand, was an accomplished toolmaker, a good problem solver, or, at times, even a "perfectionist." Many variations in form may be expressed by the maker while continuing to work within the design canon of a specific cultural group or a particular type of object. These marks of artistic expression are as distinct and often as beautiful as the more widely recognized and sought after individuality found in carved wooden masks and figurative sculpture.

K. C.: *Your view of African metalwork seems all encompassing. Does your collection also include works in copper and copper alloys? And are there other specific areas you are interested in?*

T. J.: My interest extends primarily toward forged iron objects, but because the blacksmith's activities often involved forging copper, casting nonferrous alloys, and even carving wood, I've also collected representative examples to illustrate this realm of his virtuosity.

K. C.: *Which African metal works do you respond to the most, and what objects are most strongly represented in your collection?*



T. J.: I tend to respond to objects forged from material with a previously known history and symbolically shaped like another object, yet forged too thin, too large, too heavy, or too delicate to be used for any other purpose than for a specific culturally relevant and agreed-upon meaning. These attributes are often found in currency forms or special-use trade tokens in iron and copper alloy in the shape of blades, hoes, ingots, bars, and tools. In addition to these kinds of objects, I've also extensively collected jewelry and body adornment such as anklets, bracelets, neck torques, and amulets. I'm also interested in musical instruments—lamellophones, gongs, bells, flutes, and rattles—and ritual implements including staffs, ceremonial tools, figurative forgings, and devotional objects.

K. C.: *You've been to Africa many times. Are any of the objects you encountered during your travels now in your collection, and what can you tell us about them?*

T. J.: Just one example is a clapperless bell called *ekpande* from the Kabre region of north central Togo that is played by male initiates during *waa*, the fourth of five stages of initiation Kabre boys undergo during their passage to adulthood. The ceremony takes place every five years and lasts ten days. The *ekpande* is the centerpiece of an initiate's outfit and is tied to his wrist with

a long, woven cord. It is swung in an arcing gesture that lands the bell in the young man's palm, striking an iron ring worn on his thumb. The instrument's percussive rhythm is accompanied by song, horns, whistles, and other bells played by a procession of supportive family members, neighbors, and friends.

K. C.: *How did you come by it?*

T. J.: In 2010, I was invited to attend the ceremony by anthropologist Charlie Piot, a professor at Duke University who was conducting fieldwork in Kuwdé, Togo, where *waa* was being held. Just before the event, I commissioned Kao Kossi, a blacksmith in neighboring Tcharé, where dozens of blacksmithing families operate, to make his version of this distinctive bivalve-like gong. After cold-chiseling sections of a heavy recycled truck wheel for starting stock, Kao and his assistant, Ide Essozimna, forged two identical halves using the powerful blows of a finely shaped stone hammer atop an array of partially buried basalt anvils. They drew out long, flat tabs at the top and bottom axis of each concave half and forge welded them to one another using clay slurry as a flux.

Despite how "old school" it may seem to see blacksmiths working with stone tools and pumping bellows on the ground, in the hands of skilled practitioners who've grown up with

FIG. 11 (facing page, left):
Hoe blade currency.
Shona, Zimbabwe.
Forged iron. H: 62 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

FIG. 12 (facing page, right):
Hoe blade currency, *kashu/*
mal.
Karamajong, Uganda.
Forged iron. H: 42 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

FIG. 13a–f (below):
Form variation of spear blade
currencies, *mbili*.
Ngbaka, DR Congo.
Forged iron. Height of tallest: 55 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.



FIG. 14 (right):
Group of bells with
blacksmithing tool finials.
Yoruba, Nigeria.
Forged iron. Height of tallest: 42 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

FIG. 15 (bottom right):
Percussion ratchet
instruments, *keneke*.
Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire.
Forged iron. Height of tallest: 58 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

these time-tested methodologies, these tools and processes are as efficient, if not more so, than their Western counterparts. Though such processes may be ancient, they are by no means “simple” or “primitive” and, based on my experience, represent appropriate technologies, perfectly ergonomic for the tasks they perform.

K. C.: *Are metalworking traditions still vibrant in African communities?*

T. J.: Yes. Agriculture remains the economic backbone of most African nations and it's estimated that more than eighty percent of African farms are small family-run operations. These are in large measure dependent on local blacksmiths to provide hand-forged farming tools and equipment at prices below manufactured foreign imports.

K. C.: *Besides the utilitarian value of blacksmiths, are the cultural, social, ritual, magical, and initiation qualities of blacksmithing still relevant, or have Christianity and Islam destroyed these aspects?*

T. J.: Generalizations are problematic, but in the observations that I've made during five research trips since 2008, the blacksmithing communities I've visited are still very much integrated into the complex and multilayered activities of the towns and villages where they work. Most of the blacksmiths I interviewed, especially in rural areas, go through rigorous training that may include initiation into blacksmith societies. Many of the workshops I visited in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, and Togo are regularly engaged in providing ritual objects even where Islamic and Evangelical Christian religions and/or factions have taken hold. Like blacksmiths anywhere, adaptability and market diversification tend toward successful livelihood.

K. C.: *All these years of dedicated collecting and study are culminating in an exhibition on African ironwork to open at the Fowler Museum at UCLA in mid 2018. Would you tell us about this?*



FIG. 16 (above):
Anklets, *djokelebale*.
Kota/Fang, Gabon.
Forged copper alloy. Height of largest:
20 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.



T. J.: As lead curator, I visited 147 public and private collections in the United States and abroad over the last seven years and viewed thousands of objects. From these I filtered 225 of the highest artistic achievements African blacksmiths have made from the early Iron Age to the present. To tell the visually rich and complex stories of how ironworking has shaped African cultures in practical, intellectual, and aesthetic ways, *Striking Iron* is organized around eight thematic sections that highlight a wide range of objects. These outstanding works will be complemented by video footage, soundscapes, historical and ethnographic field photographs, didactic texts, and a customized gallery tour. The exhibition is conceived to offer opportunities for visitors to pause at “focus” objects, chosen to highlight their artistry or historical importance.

It has been an honor and a pleasure to bring this project to fruition with co-curators Marla Berns (director of the Fowler Museum), Henry Drewal (professor of art history and Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin), Allen Roberts (professor of world arts and cultures at UCLA), and Bill Dewey (professor of African, African Diaspora, and Oceanic art at Pennsylvania State University). It's also a privilege to collaborate with the exceptional staff at the Fowler along with a stellar team of consultants and contributing scholars whose insightful research has fortified this survey exhibition and the accompanying book. We're looking forward to shedding new light on this extraordinary art form while celebrating the vision of African blacksmiths who have so masterfully created significant objects for more than 2,500 years.

Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths

June 3–December 8, 2018

Fowler Museum at UCLA
Los Angeles
fowler.ucla.edu

February 13–October 20, 2019

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC
africa.si.edu

November 2019–March 2020

Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac
Paris
quai Branly.fr



FIG. 17 (above):
Torques.
Mumuye/Chamba (?),
Nigeria/Cameroon.
Forged iron. Width of widest: 42 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

FIG. 18 (below left):
Title holder's ritual staff,
ofò n'dichie.
Igbo, Nigeria.
Wood, forged iron. H: 39 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

FIG. 19 (below):
Hammer/anvil.
Mambila/Mfumte,
Cameroon.
Forged iron. H: 41 cm.
Photo courtesy of Tom Joyce Studio
Archive, © 2018.

