

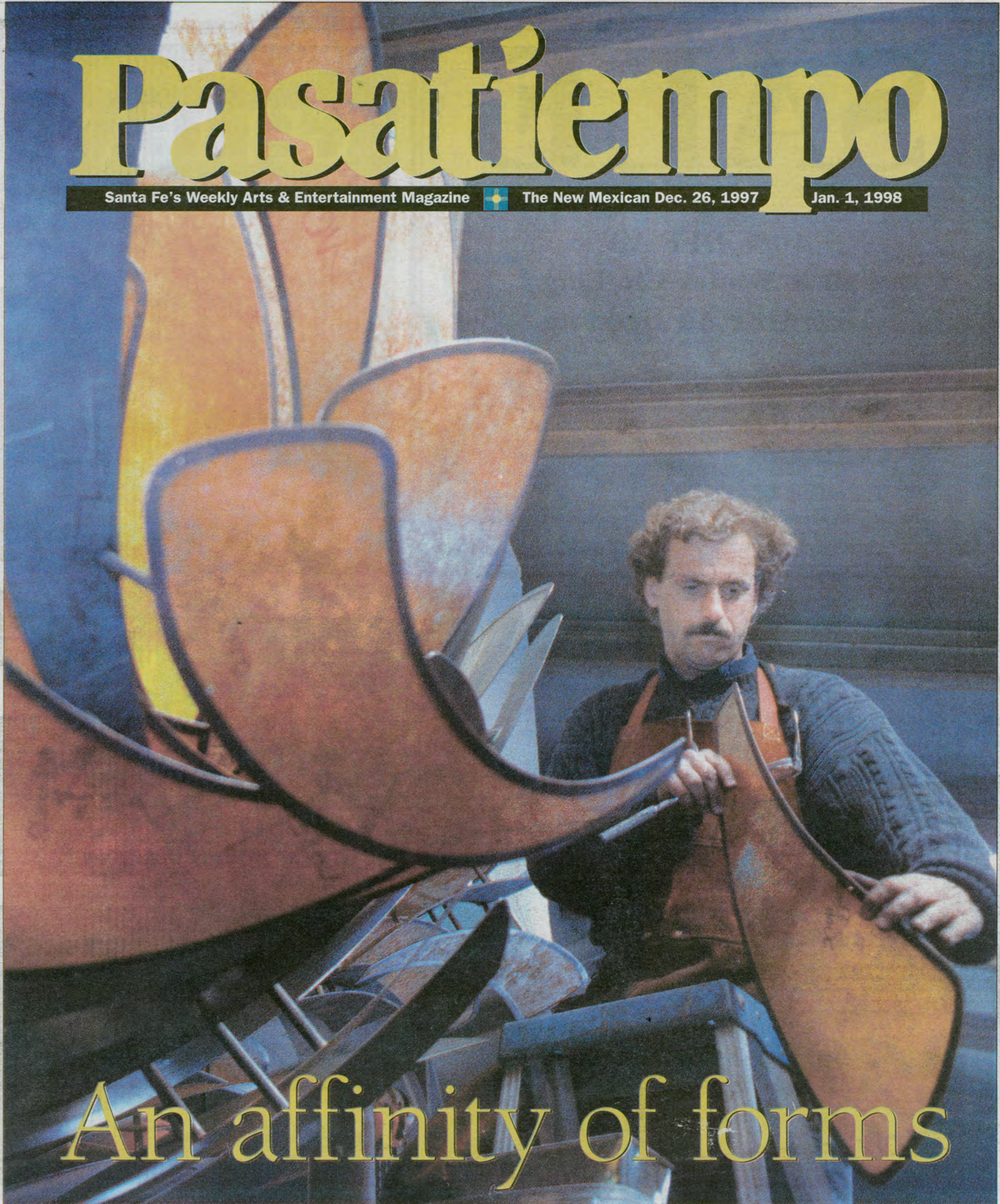
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An affinity of forms



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By GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



Metalsmith Tom Joyce at the forge

It was a wide-open concept. Santa Fe metal-smith Tom Joyce was one of 170 artists nationwide competing for a public art assignment to create a monumental lighting centerpiece for the lobby of the new Phoenix Museum of History. The only guideline was that the fixture be suggestive of Phoenix history.

Now, Phoenix history doesn't go back that far. The community was founded in 1867 by a man named Jack Swilling, who stopped to rest his horse in the area and decided crops could grow well there — if water could be brought to them.

He probably didn't know it at the time, but the same thought had occurred some 1,400 years earlier to a group of people who had come to the area from the south.

The Hohokam built an extensive series of canals for carrying water from the Salt River. They lived peacefully in an agricultural community at the site of present-day Phoenix for nearly 1,000 years before disappearing around 1400.

When the 19th-century settlers moved in, they redug some of those canals and dug new ones. That set into motion the quick pace of change that propelled Phoenix into its current status as a metropolis of a million people. There now is widespread irrigated agriculture in the surrounding area.

The Phoenix Museum of History focuses primarily on the city's history during the Victorian period of the late 1800s. The city's historical booklet devotes three paragraphs to the Hohokam era and then says, "So much for the story of our city's antiquity."

But Joyce has a hard time seeing time broken off into disconnected chunks. What came before was critical to what came later. The city's name acknowledges that fact, invoking the image of the mythical Phoenix that arose in flames to new life from the ashes of an earlier existence.

The spark of Phoenix's new life was its connection to its past: agriculture.

Joyce used that concept as the theme of his proposal for a light fixture. He was awarded the commission and a year ago began work on the project. During the next few weeks, he will install the enormous fixture in the museum's lobby. A formal dedication of the piece will take place in the spring.

Weighing almost a ton and spanning 20 feet in length and 7 feet in height, the fixture is a swirl of elongated wedge-shaped pieces of steel in earth-hued patinas and others of translucent amber-colored mica.

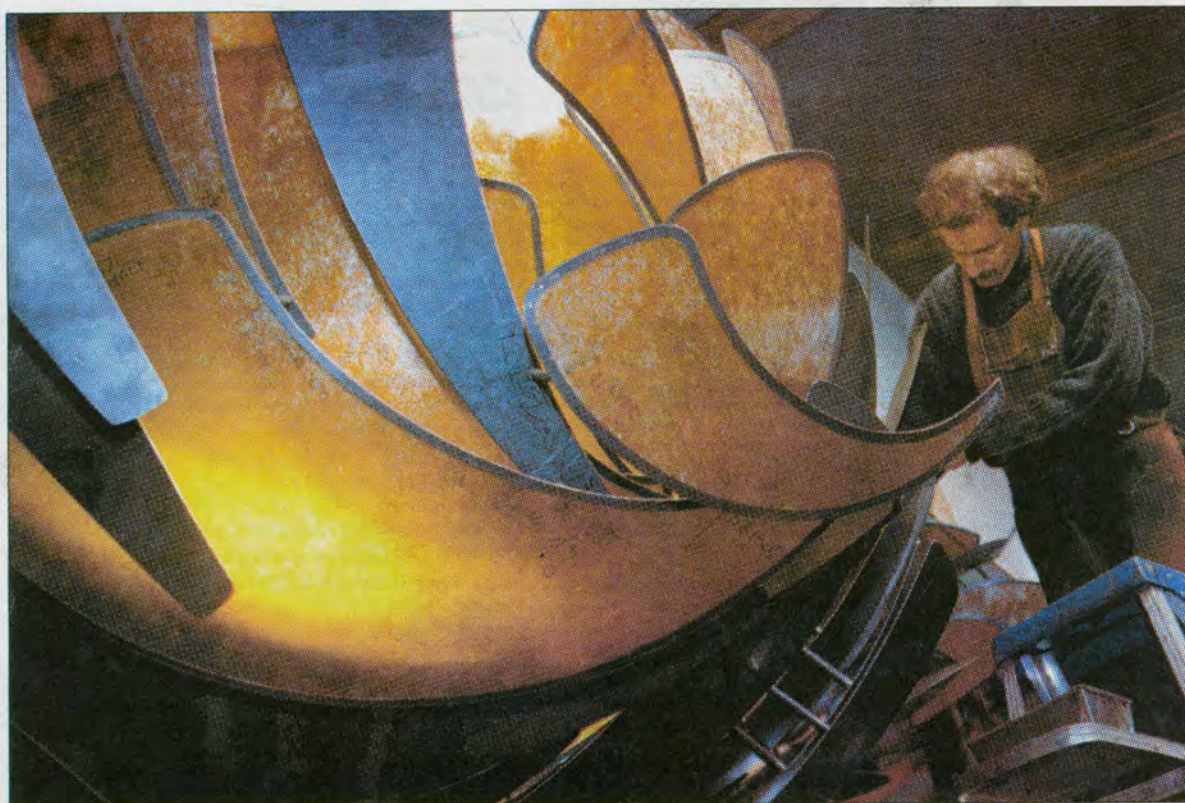
Each of the 160 pieces is separate from the others. Most flow in one direction while others appear ready to leap off in contrary directions, suggesting the turbulence of fire and of changes over time.

The wedge shapes speak of the tools, both ancient and from the 19th century, used in cultivation and harvesting: grubbing hoes, sickles and scythes and, for digging canals, shovels.

"I'm never interested in imposing an idea on a place, but instead allowing the place to suggest a story or need," Joyce said. "I felt it needed a bridge, and the agriculture was the common history that unified both prehistory and history."

Initially Joyce thought of forging iron into tools representing the evolution of farming implements in the area. But the museum's budget did not allow for that concept, so Joyce abstracted the tool shapes and cut them from sheet metal and mica.

The change altered the character of the piece by focusing on the suggestion of a fireball, turbulence,



Joyce works on the lighting centerpiece for the Phoenix Museum of History

or a life-giving storm cloud. The affinity of forms also underlines the general concept — rather than specific implements — of an activity that brought people to the Phoenix area for two separate extended periods of civilization.

And appropriately, from a distance the ceiling-hugging fixture resembles an enormous cornucopia.

When he started the project, Joyce had no detailed plan or model for the placement of the wedge-shaped pieces. He and his team — assistants Jan Rappe and Siobhan Spain along with a succession of foreign metalsmiths who worked with them as part of a journeyman program — began by building the interior steel armature that holds two large lights and served as a geometric reference point for the wedge forms.

Joyce thought he would make paper patterns and use those to decide on placement of the forms. But he soon realized that wouldn't work; the wedge forms are curved, and the paper wouldn't hold its shape after being bent.

Joyce cut the forms directly from steel and mica, and the team began the exhausting and time-consuming process of deciding where to place each form.

"There was a point when I thought it might take about four months to build," Joyce said. "But I realized after a short time that I couldn't let go of the fact that it had to grow in an organic way. We couldn't force it. It felt like an endless composition that could go in so many directions, and the question was always how to let the gestures come to resolution."

After a year of work, the light fixture was complete, except for offering Joyce and his team a final challenge: They had to take it apart, keep track of where each piece fit in, transport it to Phoenix, put it back together and hang it.

The process was worth it, Joyce said. This was his first public art project, and already he has applied for several more.

"I usually design something that I don't know exactly how to do," Joyce said. "That's part of how one continues to grow."



The hands of an artist

PHOTOS BY JULIE GRABER