

THE METALSMITH

Newport metal sculptor Howard Newman takes a medical approach to intricate restoration projects



Written by **BERNADETTE BERNON**
Photography by **DON MILLER**

STANDING BEFORE THE NEWPORT ART MUSEUM, IN NEWPORT, RHODE Island, is a blocky bronze sculpture of a humanoid torso by artist Howard Newman. This somewhat intimidating sculpture was constructed by layering armature—a favorite technique of Newman’s—over an original delicate female form in his wife’s likeness, building up and transforming it into the piece that now resides on the museum’s lawn. Ironically, Newman, an artist with a passion for precision, now finds that he spends most of his time deconstructing compromised metal works of art to rescue them.

Newman has punched all the right tickets: Fulbright Scholar, induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letter, laudatory reviews in major newspapers and art magazines. His sculptures are in the permanent collections of the Smithson-



IN HIS WORKSHOP, Howard Newman tinkers with a 19th-century cast pewter figurine of an Indian warrior; he’s rebuilding the statue, which incurred damage during a fall.

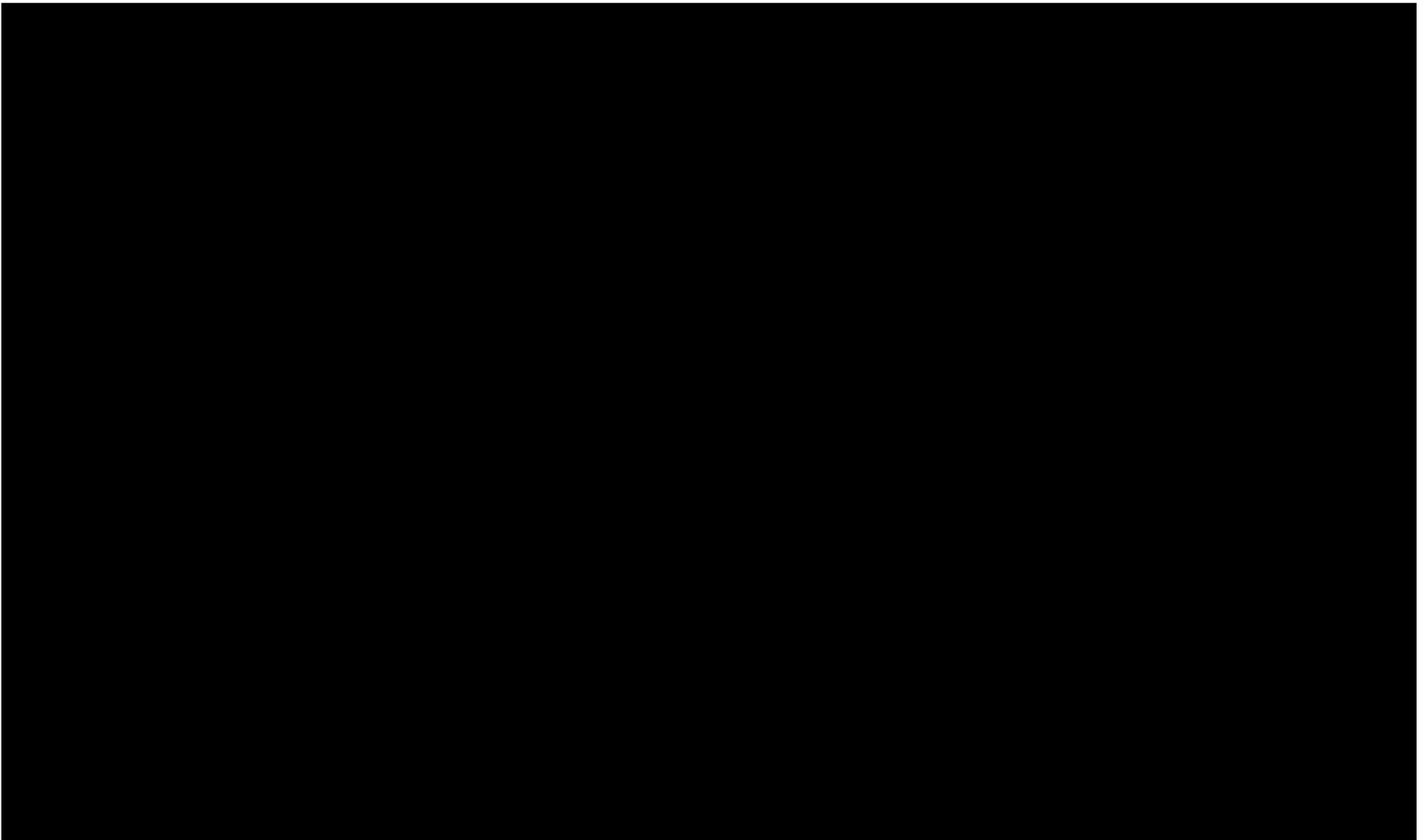


HOWARD NEWMAN and his wife, **Mary (LEFT)**, in the **Newmans Ltd.** headquarters. Newman jokingly refers to his wife as “head critic,” as she is the one who fields restoration requests. “**The Violinist**,” an iron casting of one of Newman’s own sculptures (**FAR LEFT**), stands in front of the couple’s home. The casting was taken from an edition of eight Newman created in bronze.

ian American Art Museum, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, and many others. “The premise of my life has been to do something I love, and feed my family,” says Newman. “I’m one of these people who has to focus on something completely.”

Eighteen years ago, Newman’s focus turned

from his own fine art to the restoration of metal artwork, as clients from around the world sought him out like a hospital emergency room physician to repair their wounded treasures. Today, Newman, along with his wife, operates Newmans Ltd. from his Newport, Rhode Island, home and studio. Their staff grows from two to





HOWARD NEWMAN WITH bamboo he is using for a custom design project. Bunches of the bamboo, which were grown on the client's estate, will be cast in bronze.

ten during large projects, such as the restoration of 6,000 intricate 19th-century cast iron supports on the bookshelves in Southport, Connecticut's Pequot Library. Newmans Ltd. also handled the restoration of all the artifacts in the oldest synagogue in the country, the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island: 150 rare bronze, brass, silver, and gold objects, including irreplaceable religious pieces.

"When there's a big project, it's like a French farce around here," says Newman. "People are all over the house."

In Newman's main studio at any one time are various operations in process. On one table is an 18-inch pewter figure with its arms and legs collapsed. Using medical and dental tools, Newman is in the process of cutting through the elbow, expanding the arm back to its original shape, and using a mesh of soft copper, similar to a heart stent, to bridge the joints. He relies heavily on medical websites to conjure innovative solutions; this one came from a

cardiac-surgery site. "A curious aspect of our work," he says, "is its affinity to surgery, dentistry, knitting, and butchery. Our assistants joke that if work ever slows down, we'll start doing tummy tucks."

On another worktable is a carved ivory parasol from early 19th-century China. The parasol's delicate folding handle was shattered at the hinge. Newman found his solution to repair the joint on an arthritis website illustrating human bone surgery.

There's an element of forgery in the work of restoration. "If it's broken, it's broken," says Newman. "I can't un-ring the bell." But he can take it apart, study it until he understands it, then find a way to fix it so that it looks undamaged. Newman has corrected the patinas of French bronze figurative sculptures, restored hurricane-damaged silver candelabras, and recreated antique teapot handles in ebony. A member of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Newman also restores antique mechanisms and optical devices.

Recently, he finished a most challenging project. A collector of ritual weapons sent him an early 20th-century Balinese wrought-steel sword with intricately carved ivory. The ivory had been deeply stained by a wet red cloth that had been wrapped around it for 20 years, in a cabinet that was once flooded. "The blades were heavily rusted," says Newman. "The whole thing was dicey. We agreed to a fee for trying to fix it, a reward if I was successful."

Newman experimented, putting ivory powder into various solutions. Bleach removed test stains, but also turned ivory chalky. He discovered a medical case in which a dialysis machine was accidentally contaminated with bleach, sending the patient into anaphylactic shock. A fast-thinking doctor injected her with

hypo, the solution used to stop the developing process in dark-room photography. The patient made a full recovery.

Newman used hypo to halt the bleaching process and the stain disappeared. The natural color of the ivory was restored with a light coat of diluted Lipton Instant Iced Tea. The surface was then impregnated with lacquer, and the rust was dissolved. "Rust is one of our specialties," smiles Newman. He received the reward from the grateful owner. ■

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