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Dreaming Designs: The Business Side of Creating

An Interview with Corrina Sephora
~ Mettie June

Atlanta, GA

www.corrinasephora.com

photographer: Jill Buckner
(unless otherwise indicated)

Corrina Sephora is an Atlanta-based sculptor and metalworker with a serious knack for client relations. She established her own studio in Atlanta in 1997, and specializes in sculpture, furniture, jewelry and architectural works. She has taught on the college level, and presented at both national and international blacksmithing workshops and conferences. Corrina is skilled in every aspect of the designing, engineering and problem solving involved in metalwork, from concept all the way to installation. Her passion is working closely with clients to help them achieve their dreams through metal.

Merging concept with communication in such a way that clearly conveys intentions to clients is Corrina's forte, whether she is working with designers, personal homeowners, or business associations alike. This talent for working closely with the client, from initial idea to final design and installation, is applied no matter the project. Clear communication is a skill that many artists struggle to develop, but it can be easily put into effect with time and practice. In this article, Corrina outlines all aspects of her design work, process and thinking. These skills help her tackle projects and communicate on a clear and professional level with her clients, and can help any budding artist to develop their client relations in the same manner.

Initial Meeting

"When the client(s) and I first meet, we discuss exactly what it is they are looking for in a piece of metalwork. I treat the meeting as a conversation: an inquiry and an opportunity both to listen and to be heard. I share my portfolio of previous work. Sometimes the client has purchased works

in the past, or their friends have my work in their collections, so they may already be familiar with my style. When talking to the client, I always refer to myself as an artist, and build a platform of understanding that what I create is a one-of-a-kind piece of functional fine art or sculpture. When the client gives me a clear idea of what they're looking for, I make notes and create some casual sketches. I explain my business and design policy, and give them a printed copy along with some press and images of my work for reference.

We then move on to choosing a design phase that best suites the client's needs, desires and budget. Budget is very important to consider, and I maintain plenty of flexibility for fitting a design within a client's resources. After budgeting I create from one to three drawings (I suggest never giving a client more than three options or it becomes too confusing!). My drawings are done in pen and ink, and often watercolor. They are

to scale, usually at 1"=1', so that the math is simple to enlarge. Sometimes we also work a material sample or maquette into the design phase, which gives the client an even clearer picture of their desired piece.

The pricing for the Design Phase usually ranges from several hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on size and time, and a clause in my contract includes extra fees for any change orders. Out of necessity, I learned to include this clause while designing custom pieces for private residences, as well as public sites. Clients may change their minds about what they are purchasing, and they don't always realize the amount of time it takes to make the desired changes in design or building. It is important to always value your own time and energy, and it should be agreed that the client values your time in just the same way.



MAISON FLUERY

METALWORK
& DESIGN

by

CORRINA  SEPHORA

Once the designs are agreed upon and any change orders incorporated, then the client and I will agree upon a solid price for the piece. Usually, I will discuss pricing and budget before we go into the design phase, but oftentimes a client will say they do not have a budget. However, when I am given even a loose range, then I can do the design work to fit within that perimeter. If the client is still hesitant to give a response about budget, I usually joke around a bit to make them more comfortable. I say, "I could design to the moon!" However, I make clear that utilizing design time to go in the direction of the client's dreams, while staying within their limitations, is most important to me.

Designing the Piece

The design process is often really a joy for me. I truly love to take what the client is dreaming of, and turn it into a reality. I do my best to include the client throughout the entire process, and give them some fun surprises along the way. Showing past projects can help to convince the client of any design aspects they may feel unclear on, so my portfolio is a key point for communicating the possibilities I see in metal. Occasionally I will embark on something very new and exciting, in terms of material use or design, which will be expressed as a fun, interesting challenge. I pride myself on ingenious design and engineering capabilities, and am honored each time a client allows me to put those skills to use.

This year I was privileged to have had an extraordinary solo event at a private residence in Atlanta. The event featured a series of permanent works created and designed particularly for the space, as well as an entire sculpture garden with freestanding outdoor sculptures. The garden display made it easy for the clients to select pieces for their permanent collection. The client and I had worked together on the metalwork for the house for two years beforehand, with a full year of design work before ground was even broken by the architect of the home.



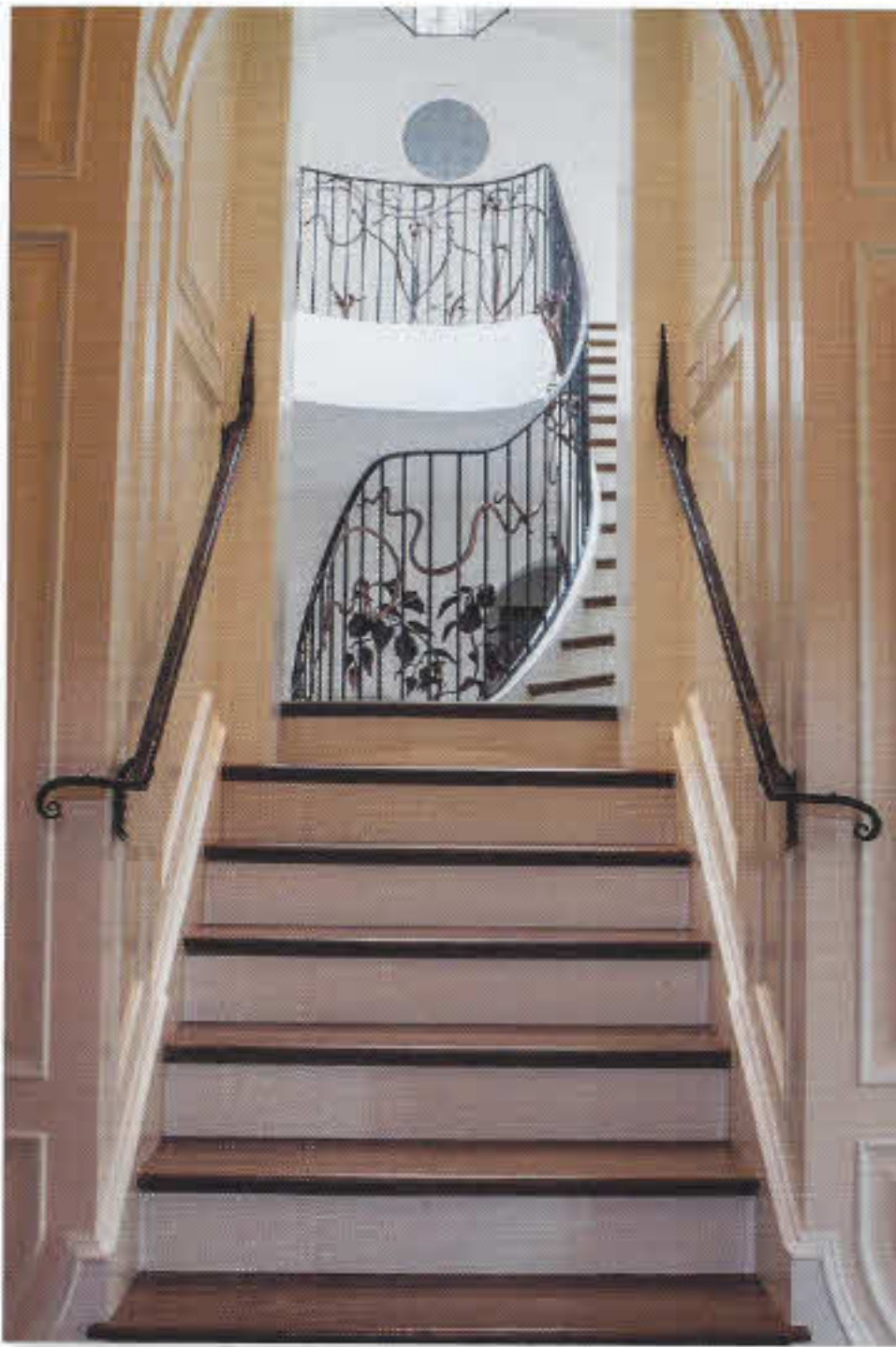
top:
Maison Kitchen Fireplace, Detail

Dimensions: 4.5' x 4' x 1'
Materials: forged steel and copper
Method: forged, formed and water jet cut steel and copper
Photo by Corrina Sephora

bottom:
Maison Flowers With Original Drawings

Dimensions: each sconce 32" x 10" x 19" approx.
Materials: forged and fabricated copper and steel, hand-blown glass.
Method: pen and ink drawings, forged and fabricated copper and steel, hand-blown glass.

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Maison Art Nouveau Railing, and detail

Dimensions: 4' x 65' x 2'

Materials: steel and copper

Method: forged and fabricated steel and copper, some fold forming, some water jet cut, then forged parts.

I originally met the client while I was a guest artist at a gala event. She commissioned me to create a series of works for her "temporary" home, a Frank Lloyd Wright-style renovated ranch. Once we had the experience of working together on a fireplace screen, tool set, and a series of outdoor wall sculptures at the temporary house, the client clearly saw my interest, excitement, and attentiveness to detail in the original custom designs. The client's husband then expressed that the temporary house was not worthy of such metalwork. Their new home, which at the time was just in the planning stages, was going to be a grand display of architecture with which my metalwork would truly be in harmony.

In a lovely testimonial, my client has stated, "Corrina immediately understood the 'Japanese garden aesthetic' I was looking for, which complemented the rest of the architecture in the house. She and I share an interest in plants, and Corrina is an amazing observer

who can draw as well as she can sculpt. I was very happy with how, through various meetings and drawing iterations, she was able to translate what was in my head into visible, tangible reality. She continued to work with us, as we commissioned many original pieces for a subsequent house. Invariably, her ornamental pieces and sculptures are some of the first things people notice when they visit our new house. I like to feel that these pieces contribute to giving the house a heart and soul, reflecting our interests and personalities and the way we live our everyday lives."

The designs for the metalwork to be featured in the new home began with a conversation about the client's favorite flowers. She listed approximately twenty different flowers and plants, and I looked up the species, and began to draw. I drew inspiration from Victorian botanical studies, although my drawings were a bit simpler, in order to create an alphabet of sorts with the plants. Many of the flowers the client listed I had

already created with metal in the past, such as the iris and calla lily, so we set a few aside after my first round of drawings. However there were a few new flowers, such as the datura, crocus, and daffodil that provided a fun and beautiful new challenge. The pieces incorporated lights and hand-blown glasswork, which was also an interesting new dynamic.

During the design process I will occasionally need to plan in some outsourcing, either to waterjet cutters for parts and components, or to another artist. Metalworker Mark Hopper and I have worked collaboratively for many years, ever since designing



the Atlanta Botanical Gardens gate, "Sun, Moon, Nautilus Passage," installed in 2003. I also work collaboratively or outsource hand-blown glass components, and other tasks like core drilling. If I am designing and creating for a site-specific location, I love to see the space if possible. Feeling the environment, seeing the style, and understanding the architecture is important to the creative process, although occasionally a structure does not exist beyond drawings, and the imagination.

It is worth mentioning that I do have slightly different approaches to the design process when working with designers and architects, versus individual homeowners or public art settings and municipal building commissions. The process I've described insofar is mainly dealing with homeowners, where we work directly together to create custom designed metalworks. The facets of designing with other clients like architects are slightly different, and oftentimes more time consuming, although always rewarding in the end. It is important to keep in mind exactly how the design process can be tailored to the particular client.

Final Creation

Once the design phase is complete, the creating begins! I typically invite the client into my studio to see a work in progress during this phase. I also set up a payment schedule in writing. Payments are split into installments of 50 percent up front and 50 percent upon completion, with a separate fee for installation. Installation fees are charged by the hour, with an estimate given with the contract, and a clause in my contract explaining the fee is for the labor of myself and two assistants, plus any extra or heavy equipment needed such as cranes, lifters, core drilling, extra people, and so on. I will schedule different payment installments on larger, long-term projects, and depending on the client's needs. However, no matter the payment schedule, I have never been left without payment for work created, and I have never installed anything without being paid. This objective returns to the importance of valuing your own work and time, and knowing that the client respects your labor in just the same way.

Maison Art Nouveau Railing, from below

Dimensions: 4' x 65' x 2'

Materials: steel and copper

Method: forged and fabricated steel and copper, some fold forming, some water jet cut, then forged parts.

The realization of the century for me was that a client could really visualize owning one of my pieces if it was already on their property, in their conference room or in their home. I will let a client display and appreciate the piece on their property for an agreed amount of time. This kind of arrangement takes a healthy level of trust and understanding between artist and client, and it's important to have a written agreement about the arrangement. However, if you can build that relationship with your clients, I highly recommend taking such a chance to gain exposure for yourself and your work. This year has been extremely lucrative for my sculptural work, based solely on that premise!

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At this juncture in my career, I am moving more towards said sculptural work, and applying the same process of creation and design as I do with all my work. I find that my approach to process has been helpful and successful throughout the years, and I am continually finding new ways of working out details and improving my craft. My architectural work has always been a "safe way" to make a living as an artist, and while still being financially successful, I am opening new doors and creating connections by sticking my neck out with sculptural work. I love to work with a client to give them exactly what they want, while staying true to my ideas and vision. I believe that learning how to merge concept with final product is one of the most important skills an artist can possess."

Much of Corrina Sephora's architectural work is designed with botanical and flower imagery in mind, while the inspiration for her sculptures lies in bird and boat imagery. Since she was a young child learning to sail with her grandfather, who was a retired sea captain and miniature boat builder, the vast wisdom and exquisite simplicity of boats and the ocean have fascinated Corrina. For her, the ocean represents mystery and power, and the ebb and flow of the past and present. The boat form is a vessel for her work, and a magical symbol for storytelling and transition. To this day, nautical themes remain the inspiration and starting point for much of her personal creative process.

Corrina Sephora's metalwork is on permanent display at The Atlanta Botanical Gardens, Temple Sinai, the Martin Luther King National Historic Site, and in many other private collections worldwide. Her work can currently be viewed in person in Ocala, Florida at the 2014 Ocala Sculpture Competition, and at the North Charleston 2014-15 National Outdoor Sculpture Competition (a division of the North Charleston Arts Festival). Her work can be viewed at www.corrinasephora.com. ❧

