

ROSE IRON WORKS *since 1904*

History of Rose Iron Works

Synopsis

Rose Iron Works, LLC was founded in 1904 by Martin Rose, a highly skilled ornamental blacksmith trained in the best shops in Budapest and Vienna. Martin brought European design and craftsmanship to Cleveland, gradually building a client base of the area's economic leaders of his time. Ever interested in new trends, Martin hired Paul Fehér away from the preeminent Kiss studio in Paris in 1929 in order to introduce Art Deco metalwork to our country. While having created the finest Deco items in America, the effort suffered due to the Great Depression.

Although continuing to offer fine wrought ironwork to discriminating clients, the company gradually increased its focus on industrial work, especially as driven by the world war periods. A number of significant works were completed during the 50's and 60's some in conjunction with renowned designers and architects.

Management eventually shifted to Martin's three sons who ran the company together until the 60's. Melvin, who took over and supported both the decorative and industrial bases, was joined by his son, Bob, in 1971. Bob, in turn, gradually took over management. During the following two decades most of the company's activities centered around growth in industrial fabrication and forging, with significant facility changes in 1975 and 1989. The 90's saw a refined focus on robotic welding which led the company to higher volumes comprised of technically challenging products.

Commitment to their heritage of excellence in decorative metalwork led the family to refocus that portion of the business just after it's 100 year birthday. Having established an extremely competent technical team to run the industrial side, Bob has begun to expand the ornamental business, introducing the concept of limited production items in addition to the time honored base of commissions.

Company History

Martin Rose, the founder of Rose Iron Works, was born in 1870, in Csepe, Hungary. At the age of ten he moved to a nearby village to live with an older brother. There he became entranced by the excitement of a blacksmith's shop. By his thirteenth birthday he had started work as an apprentice blacksmith, and after four years, in 1887, he became a journeyman.

Eager to improve his skills, he "journeyed" to Budapest and then on to Vienna in 1891 to work and to attend technical trade school where he acquired the advanced classroom learning he would need to qualify for master status. Around 1894 he returned to Budapest, where he was accepted to work in the shop of the famed master blacksmith, Jungfer, Gyula, Hungary's premiere metal smith. It was quite an honor, therefore, and testimony to Martin's skills, that Jungfer sponsored him when he applied for Master certification in 1897, a requirement before he could open his own shop. He did just that, at age 27, that year. Three years later he married Margit Mahrer, and the following year, Istvan (Stephen), the first of three children, was born.

Martin's business and his reputation quickly grew. At the time, each successful business step was followed by higher and higher taxation until in 1903, frustrated, he packed his family, \$200 and two chests of tools and left for greater opportunities in America. Although, earlier, his brother had moved to New York, Martin almost immediately moved

to Cleveland, impressed with the city's reputation as a leader in steel-making and metalworking.

After working at several companies, allowing him to get settled and begin to learn English, he opened his first shop on Cherry Avenue. Seven years later he moved to East 43rd Street, where the firm has remained for almost one hundred years. To solicit business, Martin made cold calls on potential clients, carrying with him a beautifully hand-crafted iron spray of roses, to show that he could create a quality of work unequalled in the Cleveland region.

For the first few years, the firm mostly produced pieces for commercial use. In time, this work led to commissions for residential decorative ironwork as well. During these early years Martin gradually became the source of decorative metalwork for the families building Cleveland's early economic empire. Names such as Mather, White, Halle, VanSweringen, Sherwin, Vail, Crile, Ingalls and Severance all appear in our early order books.

His first "big break," which occurred around 1905-06, was a commission to create driveway and walk gates for the home of Francis Drury (manufacturer of oil stoves marketed by Standard Oil Co.) at 8615 Euclid Avenue. Through ownership changes, the gates became available to be re-acquired and are now part of the permanent Rose collection.

In 1925-26, Martin and wife, Margaret, traveled to Europe, their first visit back since they had left for America in 1903. They took with them their youngest son, Melvin, leaving the two older sons, Stephen and Milton, to oversee the operations of the firm. At this time Martin returned to Hungary and Austria, where he acquired many notable pieces of antique ironwork, dating from the 14th century through the early 19th century, now part of our permanent collections.

During this and other trips by family members Martin became acquainted with Paul Kiss in Paris and with Paul Fehér, Kiss' head designer. Martin hired Paul Fehér in 1929, instantly establishing the dynamic relationship which resulted in some of the company's finest work. Timing, however, proved to be unfortunate. Although Fehér stayed for 5 years and accomplished a prodigious amount of work together with Martin, the persistence of the Great Depression ultimately ended their remarkable relationship.

By the mid-30's the shop was down to about 5-6 men, with Martin at times providing the work himself just to retain the most talented of his men. Then in 1939 Martin received the same prohibition as all metal work enterprises: by law, metal could only be used for defense purposes. From then to 1945, the company struggled to redefine itself as a supplier to industry. Although the post-war years saw a small amount of ornamental work, the flow was slow enough that Martin became semi-retired. Thereafter, his health declined until his death in 1955 at the age of 85.

The world war period saw Martin Rose's three sons take over the day-to-day operation of the firm. At Martin's European style direction, Stephen (oldest) was assigned the challenge of sales and overall management, Milton (middle) took control of the shop, while Melvin (youngest) who was trained in art and expected to take over as head designer, assisted with the task of converting the company's production to industrial work. Smiths who had previously relied on their visual judgment, or at best a tape measure, now had to learn to use calipers to meet the challenging requirements of the "war" work.

By the time the war ended, times and tastes had significantly changed. There was ornamental work to be done, but the level of demand was not the same. The company had to develop its industrial base to survive. The brothers strove to quickly learn about metallurgy and industrial fabrication, gradually adding the required new types of equipment to the small shop.

It was during this period, however, that the company enjoyed a variety of opportunities to create decorative commercial pieces, mostly wall sculptural in nature; frequently as collaboration between Melvin and renowned designers. Viktor Schreckengost and he produced a large mural for the entrance to Cleveland Hopkins Airport. They also collaborated on murals for Marathon Oil Company. John Paul Miller also worked with Melvin on a sculpture for Marathon Oil. Marathon Oil Co. now displays all three pieces in their Texas headquarters.

It was also during this period that Melvin developed a high level of skill in decoratively sandblasting glass panels (a skill brought from France to Rose Iron by designer Paul Fehér). His most ambitious glass project was a multi-panel, 30' glass mural designed by Cleveland artist Elsa Vick Shaw for the Dollar Steamship Line.

In 1965, the company produced a 60' long mural designed by John Risley for the Cleveland Botanical Garden. This mural, a Cleveland treasure, currently serves as inspiration for our Sketches-in-Iron series of enchanting sculpture. Other projects at that time included safety awards for Republic Steel designed by Fred Vollman, and the large state seal for the exterior of the Ohio Workers' Compensation Department designed by Robert Morrow.

Melvin took full charge of the business following Steve's retirement in 1965 and Milton's death in 1969. Bob, Melvin's son, joined him in 1970 and has continued to expand the firm's industrial capabilities. By the early '80s Bob took over the helm. Although the firm continued to enjoy a steady stream of decorative commissions during the 80's and 90's, most of the company's energy was devoted to growth in industrial fabrication. The firm's name was changed to Rose Metal Industries in the early 1970's to more accurately reflect the shift to more technically advanced products than might be expected to be furnished from an "iron works."

As the company grew, space became an issue. In 1975 Bob leased a larger facility on River Road in the downtown area know as the "flats." The additional 25,000 sq ft plus 10 ton capacity cranes allowed for substantial increase in the scope of work the company could handle. Business gradually expanded, with customer base growing to include a variety of industrial markets including steel mills and larger forge shops as well as equipment and aircraft engine manufacturers. In 1979, the company expanded its offerings to foundries, smelters and die casters by acquiring a standard hand tool line; skimmers and ladles.

The business continued to grow prompting another move in 1989, this time away from the flats to our current location, a campus-like complex much closer to our headquarters office and forge. At this time, development of more user friendly technology made industrial welding robots available to a wider range of users. Fascinated by the opportunity of using welding, one of the company's core skills, to increase sales volume, the company acquired one of the first units sold to a smaller company. This department has continued to grow and now furnishes a variety of complex weldments to equipment manufactures, truck and vehicle component suppliers as well as to our military. (See www.rosemetal.com)

Concurrent with this growth has been growing interest in expanding ornamental work, prompting a revitalization of decorative offerings. Assisted by his daughter, Barbara, Melvin, at age 90+, maintains an active client base. We are extremely proud of his being honored as The Cleveland Arts Prize 2008 Lifetime Achievement Winner in recognition of his personal and the company's efforts.

While it continues to be exciting to work with the steady stream of clients who seek our work through commissions, we also have worked diligently to develop the variety of limited production items presented on this site. This activity has been supported by the rejuvenation of our Artist-in-Residence program. As we enter into the next phase of our

company's history we look forward to adding components of teaching and of expanding art historian archival access to our palate.

Stay tuned .. for we're only slightly over one hundred years old ... and have lots to do!