

Artwork with Gear Teeth

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In Homewood AL, driving up to the Valley Hotel, you might think its 25-foot-tall sculpture is wooden, but it's not. It's metal. From a distance, it looks wooden because the metal has a thin layer, a patina, of rust. The patina is deliberate. Being outdoors, the sculpture has to withstand the elements, so “The Outpouring” is made of Corten steel, which is meant for long-term use outdoors.

The metal is designed to resist corrosion and to develop its patina over a few months outside. Once the patina forms, the metal will hold up like stainless steel, says sculptor Salem Barker.

From South Beloit, IL, Barker designed and created “The Outpouring” to be, first and foremost, a tribute to the steel-making industry in and around Birmingham, AL. The metro area includes suburban Homewood. However, the artwork also refers to precision machining through the gear teeth that wind their way up the 25-foot-tall piece.

Once you're up close, standing in front of the sculpture, you can see it starts with a crucible pouring molten material. This outpouring flows down, then curves up, continuing upward until it's above the crucible—“that suggests technological advancement,” Barker says. The material then ends with a segment that looks like part of a wing.

Barker built “The Outpouring” by welding steel panels onto a framework. Like the panels, the gear teeth are Corten steel. But, Barker says the steel for the teeth was sandblasted, treated with an adhesion promoter, then treated with an automotive clear coat: “Giving it a satin, low-luster finish.” He adds that the look of the teeth suggests modern manufacturing, something “clean and finished and precision-machined.”

Building the sculpture itself took three-and-a-half months. During construction, Barker recorded himself working, then created three short videos showing the building process. The videos can be seen on his YouTube channel, [youtube.com/c/SalemBarker](https://www.youtube.com/c/SalemBarker). The channel also includes videos of some of Barker's other sculptures. More of his sculptures can be seen on his website, salembarker.com. The site has a gallery of images, including a section of gear-themed pieces.

Barker knows about gears

from his previous career operating, repairing, and rebuilding machine tools, including gear machine tools. He spent some of that career doing on-site machining, including work at many steel mills. Traveling to customers' sites, though, involved downtime, sitting in airports, airplanes, hotels. So, Barker used the occasions to sketch, a favorite pastime.

In 2003, though, he started moving toward a career in sculpture. That year, South Beloit was hit by a storm that blew down some large trees. Barker says he noticed one of the trees and started to cut it “with artistic intent.” “I was hooked,” he adds. “And I just kept doing it.” In 2007, he became a sculptor, working first with wood and later with metal, too.


Then, in 2019, Barker heard from a real estate developer in Birmingham. Michael Mouron wanted a sculpture for the lobby in one of his hotels and knew about Barker's artwork. Barker took the job; created a six-foot-wide, wooden sculpture; and delivered it himself to Birmingham.

The trip was in mid-2020 and was the first time he and Mouron met in person. Naturally, they talked. “He just took a liking to me,” Barker says, and “he wanted to know about my background before getting into art.” That's when Mouron learned about Barker's career in manufacturing.

Barker describes their next comments, starting with Mouron's: “Oh, can you work with metal?” And I said, “Yes.” Barker says he told Mouron he could form and weld metal and adds that Mouron replied: “Let's go take a ride. Can you do something big?” And I said, “Yes.”

The ride led to a construction site, to the shell of a building. Barker says Mouron now had a new question: “What do you think would look good in the front corner of this building?”

Today, “The Outpouring” stands outside that building, the Valley Hotel, paying tribute to the steelmaking industry in the Birmingham area.

Barker himself describes the sculpture as “a new plateau” in his artwork, given that it's twice the size of his other pieces. Moreover, he gained knowledge from making the piece. “I learned so much doing this one,” he says. “I could do the next one in half the time.” 



“The Outpouring” honors the steelmaking industry in Alabama, specifically the Birmingham area. The outdoor sculpture is in suburban Homewood and includes gear teeth that are meant to suggest precision machining (photo courtesy of Craig Roderick).