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Tending the Fire

photos & story by Kay Minto, Eagleville, California

The *Integument Series* resulted from a desire to create sculptures that combined stone and metal. A community college class in ceramic shell casting offered the opportunity, and a cruise through the dictionary provided the theme word, *Integument*. The definition – an outer covering or coat – gave three examples: the skin of an animal, the coat of a seed or the membrane enclosing an organ. The three sculptures depict the concept of inner/outer with the aluminum casting of a hide on a buffalo, the pod around a sunflower seed and the membrane or sac around a heart.

The completion of these sculptures whetted an appetite for more exploration of metal and stone. However, the college class was discontinued, and I discovered commercial casting to be beyond my financial reach. In a serendipitous moment, I met with the college welding instructor, John Mulcahy, to inquire about the possibility of achieving similar results with TIG welding. John was most encouraging and even excited about exploring the possibilities of new applications for this highly specialized form of welding. I enrolled in vocational welding classes and began to learn the basics of gas tungsten arc welding.

The years spent developing the process of welding directly onto rock were filled with moments of challenge, frustration, tedium and excitement. I would approach John with a question: "What would happen if I welded this to this?" John's reply was, "I don't know. Let's go try it." The encouragement of exploration led to experiments on different combinations of rock and metal and resulted in a distinctly recognizable form of sculpture.

It was in the college welding class that I met blacksmith Tom Dudkowski. Tom's enthusiasm about smithing was contagious. Invited to attend several of his informal forging sessions, I met metalworkers from different areas with a variety of interests. Tom taught a class at the college where we learned to make some basic tools (great knowledge for stone carving!). And his blacksmithing demonstration at the Modoc County Fair, along with Ed Callaghi and metal artist Bob Goff, provided an opportunity to share the fun of forging in my neck of the woods.

What has impressed me the most in meeting people involved with different areas of metal work has been the open exchange of ideas and the willingness to share techniques and knowledge. My experiences in developing rock welding has led me to a deep appreciation for creative problem solving. I learned to ask myself, "What are all the ways I can do this?" In posing the question in this manner, I stay open to innovative answers. This is the attitude I observe in most



Bison, Integument No. 1, by Kay Minto



Sunflower Seed, Integument No. 2, by Kay Minto

of the metalworkers I meet. The kind of creative thinking that made our country great is being demonstrated by people who design their own tools when they can't find what they need, generate new uses for existing tools and materials, and generally look at the familiar with a fresh and questioning eye.

I learned in blacksmithing the importance of tending the fire – the same can be said of creativity. Techniques learned in welding, casting or blacksmithing often spark new directions – tending the fire of creativity means continual learning and exploration – and the people I have met in the California Blacksmith Association exemplify this concept (see front cover for more). ♣