

# Grand Entrances

**AFTER PIONEERING AVANT-GARDE JEWELRY, ALBERT PALEY STARTED TURNING PORTALS INTO ART.** BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY



Two years ago Albert Paley smiled as he watched his team haul into place the final pieces of an entrance gate for the St. Louis Zoo. Peering from their 130-foot

steel jungle were creatures he had conjured up more than 20 years before. Paley is the first metal sculptor to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Institute of Architecture, after three decades of producing about 40 works a year. Dramatic gateways such as the one in St. Louis are his specialty—he has created more than 100 portals and entryways in his lifetime—but these whimsical gates held a particular satisfaction. Originally designed in the 1980s as an entrance to the Central Park Zoo, the project's financing fell through and the gates were never produced. Paley once called it “the greatest disappointment of my career.”

By the time he was asked to resurrect Animals

Always, Paley's operation had expanded and modernized and so had the gates—now four times larger than the Central Park version and made with laser-cut and hydraulically bent steel in place of forged iron. “I had 20 years to resolve that design,” Paley says. “But it's still a very literal piece with flora and fauna and probably 130 different animals.”

Paley didn't always work on such a grand scale. He started by making sculpture small enough to wear on a lapel. A leader of the studio jewelry movement in its heyday, Paley traded silver and gold for iron and steel in the 1970s. His distinctive sculptures and portal gates now grace hundreds of sites across the country, while his early decorative arts sell for impressive prices at auction. Today, Paley continues to explore the plastic nature of metal and the integration of architecture with ornamental metalwork.

Born to a working-class family in Philadelphia in 1944, Paley followed a girlfriend to the Tyler

**The Grand Concert Piano, macassar ebony and brushed brass, was released this year to a private collector.**



The Vik-ter Chair is sculptural but comfortable museums. Desk for John Lennon (top), 1974.

School of Art, just outside the city, and discovered he had a talent for three-dimensional form. After studying sculpture as an undergraduate, he switched to goldsmithing for his master's degree, inspired by his mentor, Stanley Lechtzin, who was the innovative head of the school's jewelry department.

Paley approached jewelry with a sculptor's sensibility, creating dramatic pendants and brooches that served as body-specific sculptures. The craft movement was taking off, and Paley soon became a leader in the jewelry arts, teaching studio jewelry at Tyler and later Rochester Institute. But by the early 1970s, he was frustrated with studio jewelry, sensing that the field had

become overcrowded and derivative.

While forming hammers and chisels for jewelry-making, he discovered ironwork and began forging candlesticks as an experiment, before moving on to planters, mirrors and small tables. Blacksmithing was a far cry from fabricating silver and gold, but candlesticks felt like familiar territory. "In many ways, the functional concerns were the same—the aesthetic boundaries, the scale. The relationship of candlestick to candle was similar to the relationship of jewelry to the body," Paley says. "I was trying to express the plastic nature of heated iron. When it's hot, you can fold it and bend it. I wanted the resulting form to reflect that."

In 1974, the Smithsonian Institution invited eight artists to submit drawings for the entrance gates of the new Renwick Gallery of American crafts and decorative arts at the American Art Museum. Paley won the commission, despite the fact that he had never produced anything larger than candlesticks and a couple of small tables. "In the early '70s, very few people were doing ironwork," he says. "It was an incredible opportunity, but I never thought it would change my career the way it did."

To this day, the Renwick uses Paley's "Portal Gates" as its visual trademark. A baroque mass of twisted iron, copper and steel, the gates are a contemporary twist on a Belle Epoque theme: a perfect prelude to the historic building and its displays. Just as he had mixed gold and silver in his jewelry, Paley used polished copper to contrast with blackened iron. His ornamental Renwick gates offered a visual complexity not seen for decades and heralded the beginnings of postmodernism, which would take over in the '80s as a reaction to the austerity of modernism and the Bauhaus.

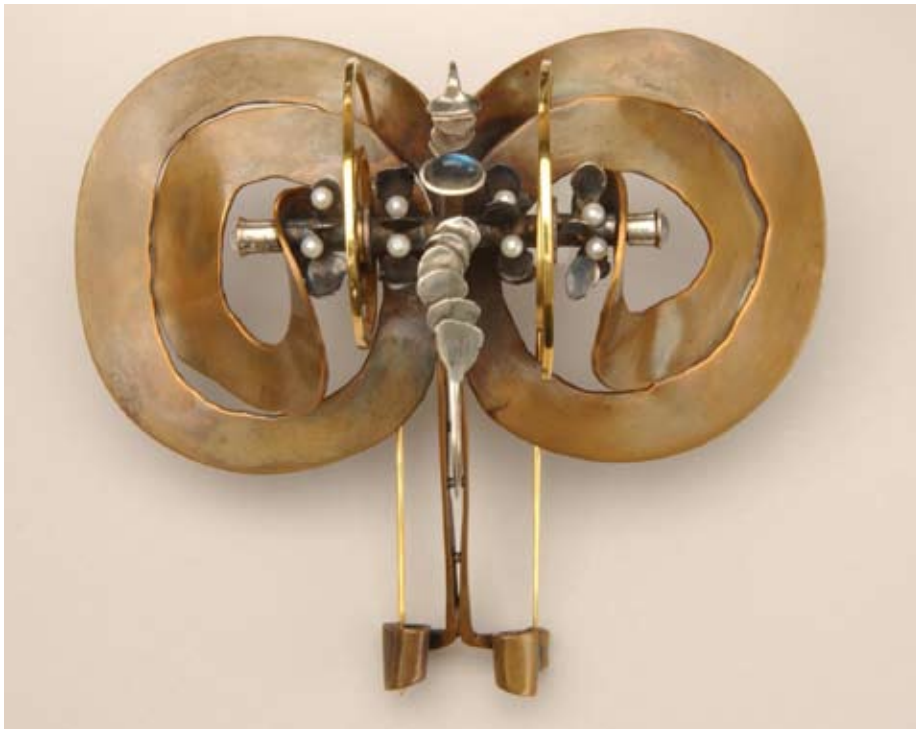
"Modernism stripped ornamentation from buildings," Paley says. "My work was always seen as a counterpoint to architecture. With postmodernism, ornament was looked at again as part of the architectural vernacular."

The Renwick commission spurred others, and Paley set up a studio to make forged and fabricated furniture and large-scale work while continuing to produce and teach jewelry. But he found architectural metalwork and goldsmithing an uncomfortable fit. "Sitting at a goldsmith bench is a totally different discipline from ironwork, which involves noise and smoke," he says. "It's an industrial sensibility, which I turned into an art process. I had to adapt environmentally."

Like the Renwick gates, much of Paley's early work featured unfurling vines and whiplash motifs that spawned constant comparisons to Art Nouveau. His initial influence was not the Victorian era, he insists, but ancient Celtic, Turkish and Oceanic decorative arts, all of which are characterized by fluid, organic forms.

Paley created his last piece of jewelry in

**Paley approached jewelry with a sculptor's sensibility, creating dramatic pendants and brooches that served as body-specific sculptures.**



***Bimah in the Temple Jeremiah, Winnetka, Illinois, designed by Jackson and H. Gary Frank.***

1978 and hired a full-time assistant to help produce large-scale work. Where goldsmithing was a solitary venture, large-scale metals required teamwork. Paley now employs a staff of 15 and, increasingly, has large, steel elements produced off-site. While he still enjoys hands-on production, half his time is spent designing and orchestrating, “similar to what an architect does,” he says.


Starting with the Renwick coup, Paley’s forte has been the dramatic entrance. Recently, he completed a portal gate for the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., and not far away, a 100-foot sculpture, still unnamed, at the entrance of the new National Harbor complex, a \$2 billion convention center and hotel development on the Potomac River.

Even his sculptures often serve as portals of sorts. “A lot of my sculptures are free-standing pieces adjacent to buildings, so

there is a dialogue created between the architecture, the landscape design and the artwork itself,” Paley says. “This is the main focus now: how to enrich the architectural environment with the inclusion of artwork.”

The exhibition “Albert Paley: Portals and Gates” at the Christian Peterson Art Museum, Iowa State University, through January 15, demonstrates his notable facility with the genre. “I like the symbolism involved in creating entranceways,” he says. “You enter a building through that portal, experience something inside, then go out through the portal and you’ve changed in the process. Entranceways represent the act of passage from the outside to the inside, light to dark—the whole aspect of transition.”

Paley stopped making production furniture a few years ago but still accepts commissions for furniture, lamps and even

candlesticks. His early decorative-arts pieces have become highly collectible, and his jewelry brings impressive prices at auction. A fibula brooch Paley made as a graduate student sold in April 2006 at Rago’s Arts and Auction Center for \$30,000. Four of his jewelry pieces are featured in the “Ornament as Art” exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston through January. Paley returned to the jeweler’s bench last year after accepting his first jewelry commission in three decades. “I’m pouring out my old jewelry tools and making sketches,” says Paley. “I feel like Rip Van Winkle.” 

*Cathleen McCarthy has written about art and design for two decades.*

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**Hawk Galleries, Columbus, Ohio**  
614.225.9595 [HawkGalleries.com](http://HawkGalleries.com)

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**Hawthorne Gallery, Big Sur, Calif.**  
831.667.3200 [hawthornegallery.com](http://hawthornegallery.com)

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**Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tenn.**  
423.267.0968 [huntermuseum.org](http://huntermuseum.org)

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**Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tenn.**  
901.544.6200 [brooksmuseum.org](http://brooksmuseum.org)

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**Millennia Fine Art, Orlando**  
407.304.8100 [milleniafineart.com](http://milleniafineart.com)

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**Rago Arts and Auction Center, Lambertville, N.J.**  
609.397.9374 [RagoArts.com](http://RagoArts.com)

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**Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.**  
202.633.2850 [americanart.si.edu/renwick](http://americanart.si.edu/renwick)

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**Victoria & Albert Museum, London**  
011.44.20.7942.2000 [vam.ac.uk](http://vam.ac.uk)

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**Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Va.**  
804.340.1400 [vmfa.state.va.us](http://vmfa.state.va.us)