

CAST STONE: REVIVING CRAFT FROM THE PAST



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Sometimes, after an especially aggravating day of being dumped on by clients, building officials, and contractors alike, I feel like walking away from the hassles of architecture and becoming, say, a hot dog vendor on the Berkeley pier.

“And what would you like on that, sir? Sauerkraut? Sure, no problem. No problem at all.”

Good sense eventually takes over — I think — and I realize that every job has its attendant troubles.

Recently, however, I met a man whose occupation made me genuinely envious.

His name is David Condon, and he creates beautiful architectural ornamentation from cast stone.

It’s a craft firmly rooted in the past, and one that I think few other occupations could match for the simple joy of creation.

Unlike the flimsy plans of architects, which are usually diluted and compromised beyond recognition, Condon creates enduring beauty directly, with his own hands.

No middlemen get in his way.

Condon’s firm, Kiln Works, is located in a simple shop beside the tidal flats of Oakland, California.

Entering it is like going back 600 years, to the age of the Gothic stonemason.

Back then, a man might spend his entire life carving ornament for one small section of a cathedral.

But when he had finished, what a legacy lay frozen in stone!

Because of the difficulty and expense of carving natural stone, a product known as “cast stone,” consisting mainly of sand and cement, was developed in the late 19th century.

It reached its heyday in the 1920s with the popularity of Gothic Revival and other architectural styles requiring the look of stone.

Cornices, column capitals, balustrades, and countless other cast stone ornaments proliferated on building facades during these years.

The popularity of cast stone in architecture declined with the rise of the Modernist movement, which preferred ultra-smooth surfaces.

By mid-century, the craft had nearly died out.

As a result, most people today are familiar with cast stone only in the form of garden dwarfs and such.

Condon’s work revives the original architectural uses of cast stone.

While some of his projects involve restoration of vintage ornament, many others are his own creations.

Condon is an expert carver, the likes of which I didn’t think existed anymore.

To make a cast stone piece, he creates a positive model or pattern made from wax, Plasticine, gypsum cement, or some other appropriate material.

A negative rubber mold is then created of this pattern.

Finally, the liquid “stone” (usually a glass-fiber reinforced cement) is poured into the mold and allowed to set.

After it’s hardened, the rubber mold is removed, leaving an exquisitely detailed piece of cast stone.

Urns are cast using a special hand-operated fixture designed by Condon which spins the piece in two planes at once, thus ensuring that the cement coats the inside of the mold uniformly.

It’s as close to high technology as the shop gets.

Since it's literally a hand-made product, architectural cast stone is not cheap.

But nothing beside genuine stone can compete with it for beauty and permanence.

It's nice to know that it's available again, and that there are modern-day stonecarvers like Condon who are still devoted to their work.

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