

# SAN DIEGO HOME/GARDEN

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We Salute 10 Master Artists,  
Craftsmen and Designers

2010

# HANS LIEBSCHER

## *coppersmith*

BY EVA DITLER

“ONE MACHINE CAN DO THE WORK OF 50 ORDINARY men,” wrote the American philosopher/author Elbert Hubbard. “No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man.” Hubbard wasn’t talking about Hans Liebscher, but had he known this coppersmith from San Marcos — who still employs the anvil and hammer in the way of the 4,000-year-old tradition — he might have mentioned him.

“I will never get old enough to learn everything about copper,” says Liebscher. “You can’t learn this trade from a book.”

Besides his three-year apprenticeship working with a master coppersmith in his homeland of Germany when he was 16, Liebscher has learned from master artisans from Switzerland to Spain, from France to Turkey. “I discovered skills, methods and tricks on how to do things and personalized them — I don’t even show my guys what I’m doing.”

Immigrating to America in 1985, Liebscher opened his San Marcos studio a short time later. Here he specializes in hand-

embellished fireplaces, ornate cupolas, one-of-a-kind finials, curved gutters, leader heads, decorative downspouts and brackets, roof tiles, ornamental hardware, range hoods, bathtubs and even gargoyles. Many of his designs, including his roof tiles, are patented. There’s nothing cookie-cutter or straight-off-the-shelf with this coppersmith.

“This is craftsmanship — working with your hands. I saw on the Internet coppersmithing with a machine — *a machine!* I almost fell out of my chair. For handwork you have to be patient. It takes a long time. There’s stuff, like the gargoyles, you can’t do with a stamped form or on the computer.”

Copper has been widely used on buildings in Europe for hundreds of years. Not only does it remain intact for all that time, it grows more beautiful with age — witness the 31 tons of copper that make up the 124-year-old Statue of Liberty.

Opposite: Hans Liebscher in his studio.

Below: A whimsical crowned gargoyle waterspout, designed by Hans Liebscher, keeps water away from the roof and the side of a Rancho Santa Fe home styled after a French chateau.







"You can't beat the aesthetics of copper," says Liebscher. "It ages gracefully from a red shine to a rich green patina that stands out on buildings and catches your eye. There's no other color like this in nature."

"Copper is the original 'green' material long before that word came out. It's always been recyclable. Even if a house is torn down, no one is going to throw away the copper just because the house is dismantled. Copper doesn't deteriorate — its longevity is legendary — so what becomes most important is the installation. It needs to be installed correctly."

Copper installations are becoming more prevalent on the exterior of our Southern California homes. "In my experience," says Liebscher, "copper is a must for all houses on the coast. Other materials corrode. Inland, copper is an option but any house with copper, no matter where it is, is going to be a well-built house. If you see copper on a house, you know the builder hasn't skimped on anything."

As a skilled artisan Liebscher designs copper work with handcrafted detail. His copper accents for chimney surrounds or on cupolas create interest where there's a large expanse of roof. His gutter systems, which include decorative downspouts, brackets and

leader heads, are accent pieces that add a final touch to a house — "an architectural item, like a frame around a picture," says Liebscher. "Instead of just a trough going down the roof, the gutters become part of the roof, part of the eaves, adding character to the whole house."

If a homeowner wants a copper sculptural feature for a house and it hasn't been done before, Liebscher will

find out how to do it.

"It's a creative process and I'm always learning something new. It takes countless hours and you have to have the passion for it. Some people think they can just learn how to do this, but it's like being an author. Just because you know how to hold a pen, doesn't mean you can write a book." ∞

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*Opposite, clockwise from top left (all by Hans Liebscher):* Two hand-hammered Florentine leader heads ❖ Fireplace surround hand-hammered with a shingle front ❖ Roof cupola ❖ Ornamental urns or finials ❖ Set of artistic chimeras resembling gargoyles ❖ Victorian roof finial

*This page:* These medieval-style copper gargoyles by Hans Liebscher would scare off any harmful spirits. Gargoyles such as these function as waterspouts; sculptures resembling gargoyles (opposite page) serve only as ornaments.

## Highlights

### NOTEWORTHY

Historic restoration work:

- ★ Griffith Observatory, Los Angeles
- ★ The Pickwick Hotel (now called The Sofia Hotel) on Broadway, downtown San Diego
- ★ St. Paul's Cathedral, Hillcrest
- ★ Scotty's Castle, Death Valley

### HONORS

- ★ Named Coppersmith of the 21st Century by the Coppersmith Development Association, 2008