

BY SCOT MORISON

PHOTOGRAPHY CURTIS TRENT

IRONMEN

FORGE 53 IS A NEW HEAVY METAL DUO

JESSE
RUDIGER-
AASGARD
AND
MIKE
MUIRHEAD
OF
FORGE
53



L-R HILLSIDE MIRROR, LUMSDEN CHAIR, NOR-WOOD HOLDER AND HIGH STREET LADDER



PHOTOS PAUL SWANSON

A RHINOCEROS

is about the last thing you expect to see standing behind the door to the production floor of a metal fabrication shop. But that's exactly what I encounter on entering the room where the magic happens at Forge 53. Tucked into an unassuming pocket of light industry in south-central Edmonton, this high-end custom metal furniture and sculpture studio, accessed by appointment only, is earning raves both locally and from as far afield as Baltimore and Los Angeles.

IN L.A. DINING TABLE, CHAIRS AND CHANDELIER

“It’s actually a Northern white rhino, 80-percent scale,” says Jesse Rudiger-Aasgard of the shop’s unofficial greeter. (He is named Sudan, after the world’s last male Northern white rhino who died in a Czech zoo last year.) Rudiger-Aasgard co-owns Forge 53 and its sibling, Forge North, with Mike Muirhead, the steel rhino’s sculptor. Muirhead’s late father was an accomplished taxidermist, which partially explains a son’s inspiration for the project. “I was always around animals through my dad’s profession,” he says.

But more on that later. Close friends since Grade 3, Muirhead and Rudiger-Aasgard first went into business together as a pair of ambitious 12-year-olds growing up off Whyte Avenue. They launched a snow shoveling service in the neighbourhood that earned each of them the cash for a PlayStation 2 long before any of their classmates had one, though it took a dozen years and a handful of different jobs on their own before they took another run at working as partners.

“We were like, we’ve got to do this on our own,” says Rudiger-Aasgard, who grew up with entrepreneur parents and was primed for a new challenge after a few years of job hopping. “I didn’t do any post-secondary education. I just worked wherever I could.”

In 2014, the two friends, then in their mid-20s, sat down with a thick notebook of business ideas they had compiled over the years. There was a cigar shop, a coffee shop, even a grown-up reprise of their original snow removal and landscape service. “But then we did our research and saw 400 pages of them on Google,” Muirhead says, laughing.

One of Muirhead’s previous jobs was manufacturing massive excavator buckets and metal castings for the oil sands. It always slightly bugged him to watch the beautifully finished pieces he’d just spent 200-300 hours building and painting go right into the dirt and get wrecked. The thought of displaying completed work instead of just plowing it into the ground was appealing.

They began with Forge North, a metal fabrication company that specializes in aesthetic custom steel products for residential and commercial clients: Everything from staircase railings and ornamental fencing for luxury homes, to benches and bike racks in public spaces, to ornamental patio decks and display shelving in Edmonton bars and restaurants like Ace Coffee Roasters, Rocky Mountain Icehouse, Cask & Barrel and DOSC.



PHOTO PAUL SWANSON

Forge 53 (53 referencing the line of latitude their hometown sits upon) came about after Forge North clients started asking if the pair might be up to making fine furniture and furnishings, too. “That was a leap for us,” admits Rudiger-Aasgard, but, over the past several years, their commissions have produced some truly eye-popping works in brass, aluminum and steel, best described as functional art; dining room and coffee tables, firewood stands, wine racks, desks, chandeliers, chairs and sculptures. The pieces are often mixed-media and see the pair collaborating with members of Edmonton’s talented woodworking community and other local artists. “You go to the Farmers’ Market and there’s so many craftsmen there putting out high-quality items,” Muirhead says. “Rather than us trying to compete with these guys, why not build a community and work with them?”

Getting back to Sudan, Muirhead’s steel rhino was not a commissioned piece but the sequel to one. In 2018, a Los Angeles designer he and Rudiger-Aasgard had worked with before asked the Forge 53 boys to design and build a metal dog for installation in the rooftop dog park of a boutique hotel she was doing in Baltimore. Muirhead used his sister’s pet as a model and drew on the informal anatomy lessons his taxidermist dad had given him. As soon as he finished, he was keen to do another. Ergo, rhino.

Next up, if Muirhead has his way, is something even bigger. “As a principle of mine, I don’t want to build the same animal twice,” he says. He is hoping the rhino might serve as proof of concept for an idea that he and Rudiger-Aasgard want to pitch to the Valley Zoo: A piece of public art celebrating Lucy the elephant after she’s gone. “She’s famous and maybe infamous as well, and I think it would be neat to have something representing her that lasts forever,” says Rudiger-Aasgard. 🐘