

# The iron and the forge, a missed opportunity

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The publishing house Brau Edicions, within the framework of the collection "Tools and jobs", published the book in November 2020 *El ferro i la forja* [*The iron and the forge*], written by historians Ruth García López and Héctor López Silva. The authors, two cousins related to a family of locksmiths from Mataró, are known for having published an article on the history and sacred art of the basilica of Santa Maria de Mataró.

In the words of the publisher, the book offers the reader "a journey through the blacksmith's trades, from cutting blacksmiths to tinsmiths through locksmiths, gunsmiths or knife makers, with special attention to the popular and artisan side of the trade".

The contents are articulated from two fundamental axes: a historical discourse, focused on the evolution of the trade and its specialities, and a technological discourse, which aims to didactically document the technical processes that take part in the construction of specific heritage elements.

The idea is not new: it is based on a project promoted by the Escuela de los Oficios de León – inspired by European experiences – which came

together in the book *Guía práctica de la forja artística* [*Practical guide to artistic forging*], edited in 1997 and illustrated with a large number of explanatory drawings. On that occasion, the historical contents were entrusted to Dr. Fernando de Olaguer-Feliu, a Madrid historian who had studied the Reixeria of the Cathedral of Toledo.

Unlike the Catalan book, the *Practical guide to artistic forging* was part of a teaching project structured within the framework of an educational institution in the field of forging and iron. However, it had the disadvantage of offering a biased view of the history and practical knowledge of the trade, in the sense that it reconstructed heritage pieces based solely on the technical knowledge of current artisans.

The book *The iron and the forge*, by Brau Edicions, is an adaptation of this project and, consequently, is conditioned by the same limits.

Effectively, the authors draw a synthesis of the historical trades derived from iron based, above all, on the works published by researchers specializing in this subject - quite numerous in recent years - and on the posts published on the Ferro blog of the National Museum of Science and Technology – who have provided a large part of the discourse and the photographic corpus that accompanies it.

Despite this, the text is built on confusing concepts and rebuttable claims, and offers a cursory review of the historical sources – based mostly on the



transcripts published by researchers specialising in these topics. We recall that our archives preserve a large amount of written and printed data that allow us to successfully trace the evolution of the metal sector from the late medieval centuries to the contemporary era: they stand out, due to their potential, for the notarial, trade union, legal and economic documentation, and a remarkable corpus of recipe books and ancient technical treatises that modern digitisation has made available to researchers.

As for the profession, the range of specialities analysed by the authors of the book is based on the already classic works of Joan Amades, Ramon Violant i Simorra, Fritz Krüger, Duran i Sanpere, Marimon, Martí de Riquer and the contributions of other active researchers. However, it is necessary to trace the medieval origins of trades that have evolved and survived through popular activity, such as the 'iron cutters', the anchor forgers, the 'roman-

ers', the blacksmiths *of large works*, the lantern makers, the file cutters and the tinsmiths, the latter originally linked to the manufacture of 'tins' for armour.

Despite the fact that there is an effort to articulate the historical discourse, which covers quite a few areas related to the profession and popular work, the cataloguing of heritage elements is not rigorous and, in the technical aspect, not much has been done beyond Catalanizing the glossary and replacing the excellent drawings of the Spanish version with an abundant photographic corpus. It is worth saying that this task required the creation of synergies and complicity with the schools of arts and trades and with the terminological bodies of reference in the Catalan language (TERMCAT), since I understand that they had something to say about it.

As for the exposition of the processes, the book is fully inspired by the *Practical guide to artistic forging* and therefore commits the same methodological error: it has not taken into account that the techniques used by current smiths are not the same as the ancient ones. For this reason, researchers are obliged to contrast them through a long and expensive historical research process whose main objective is to identify the materials, tools and processes used in a given era - something that is not always possible.

The study and reconstruction of historical techniques, both artistic and functional, requires a multidisciplinary project that is articulated from the teamwork of a large number of professional profiles. In the case of metal, it is necessary to have metallurgists, heritage technicians, historians, restorers and highly specialised craftsmen. The former bring knowledge of metal and ancient steel making; the second, asset

management; the third, the knowledge of the rich written and iconographic sources; the fourth, the knowledge of techniques and materials, and the fifth, the practical experience of the trade.

Without this methodological approach, any project that aims to address historical techniques will have erroneous concepts and inaccuracies that will lead to a lack of scientific rigour and, in the most unfavourable case, to pure invention. It can serve to document the techniques currently used by blacksmiths in forging festivals or in their private workshops, but in no case is it a reference for historical reconstruction.

I also miss the inclusion of well-documented technical processes in the ironwork and the manufacture of numerous historical typologies, such as gold and polychrome coatings, tinwork or leadwork.<sup>1</sup>

If the goal of the book *The iron and the forge* was to present a historical synthesis of the trades that work with ferrous metals and the technical processes that are specific to them, I think it should have been proposed based on a multidisciplinary perspective that accommodated researchers with experience in metal heritage - mainly in historical, ethnological and metallurgical research - and blacksmiths with a wide background in the field of historical techniques.

A proposal of these characteristics was perfectly feasible: in 2018, the editor of the collection "Tools and Works" contacted me to explain the intention of making this book. It seemed to me to be an excellent idea, as it offered the opportunity to create an informative cultural product, of a multidisciplinary nature, which gave voice to the knowledge generated by Catalan research-

ers, technicians, artisans and publicists over the last few years. Unfortunately, however, Brau Edicions has preferred to publish a proposal that has already been seen that does not include the multidisciplinary sensibility or the methodological advances of the 21st century.

*Link to the review of the book published by the publisher Brau Edicions:*

[http://www.brauedicions.com/fonseditorial.php?search=The iron and the forge](http://www.brauedicions.com/fonseditorial.php?search=The%20iron%20and%20the%20forge) ■

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#### NOTE

**1** These techniques, applied both in monumental forging and in the manufacture of everyday items, have been documented through written sources and preserved iron objects. See as an example the acts of *I Congress of conservation and restoration of the Metallic Heritage. Metal España '08*, Autonomous University of Madrid, Madrid, 2009.