

NEW ORLEANS IRONWORK

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"Hye won hye" design detail.

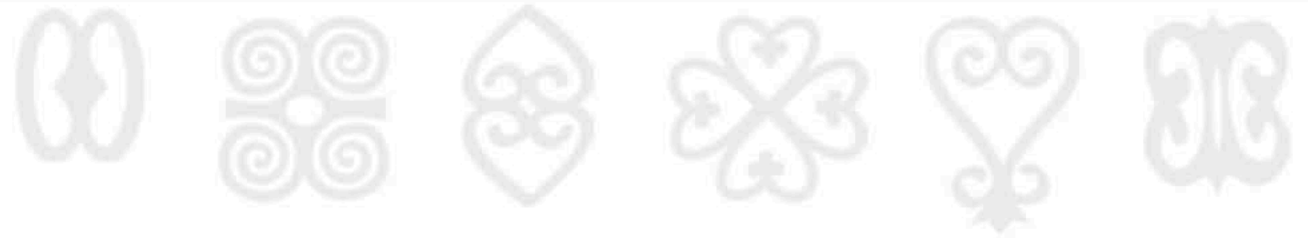
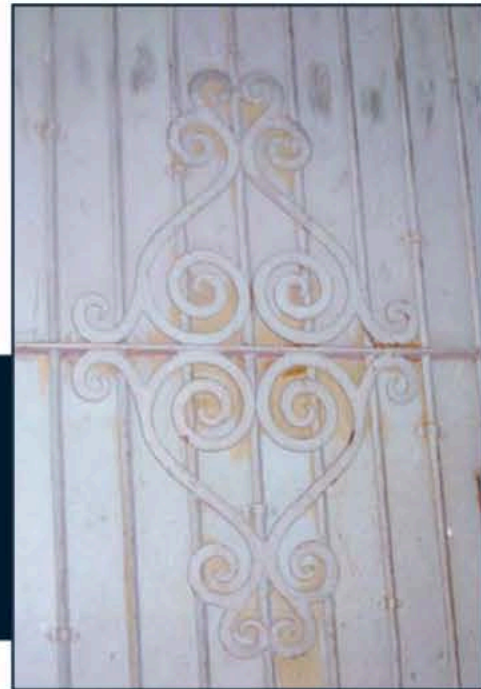
Full speed of fire forges ahead with an insistence that there must be something more to a lump of metal than meets the eye—this is what connects all workers of iron. I am an aficionado. I live where iron carefully wraps around window sills, doorways, and balustrades; here the forge's bright orange belly and the hammer have given birth to all manner of curves, angles, lines and spirals. These lines and curves too, carry more than meets the eye. From fire into iron is where those who wrought lines and curves have folded their messages.

The messages forged into iron shapes have crossed centuries, cultures and continents. As a person's expertise with metal and fire can travel with that person, so can cultural patterns particular to the places they come from. I have just finished a large (three parish) education project that explored cultural retentions and symbol-

ism woven in to the architecture of the Mississippi Delta. A *cultural retention* is something that remains from a culture, and can be identified as having come from that particular culture. Many are aware of European cultural retentions. Sometimes the elements of African cultures that have been retained are not so obvious. Since the 1800s, Adinkra symbols from West Africa have been woven into wrought iron designs found up and down the Mississippi Delta. These Adinkra symbols communicate complex messages and complicated concepts that relate to individuals and to society as a whole. In Africa, between savannah and forest, since the 1200s, smiths have forged metal by hand from clay furnaces fueled with charcoal. One of the main professions of West Africans, it seems, is that of metalworking. Further, according to a paper titled "African Iron-making Culture Among African American Ironworkers in Western Maryland 1760-1850," Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta are not unique. "Technological diffusion occurred and occupa-



"Hye won hye," translated as "that which cannot be burned," is equated with toughness, imperishability, overcoming adversity and endless endurance. In an ironic twist, this symbol is featured prominently in all of the balconies that wrap around the Pontalba buildings in New Orleans. The Pontalba buildings, along with St. Louis Cathedral and the Cabildo, were reconstructed following a devastating fire five blocks wide and nine blocks long that, in 1794, decimated these buildings along with 207 others. Additionally, "Hye won hye" was a powerful testament to tenacity; in 1788 in New Orleans, 856 buildings had previously been obliterated by fire.



"Nyame biribi wo soro"



"Nyame biribi wo soro" signifies that "God is in the heavens." This image is from a balcony located at 2408 Chartres Street in New Orleans. In 2001, this building received the "New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission Honor Award." The idea behind this Adinkra symbol is that residing in the heavens gives God the ability to hear all prayers. This symbol is also equated with hope.

One of the oldest Adinkra symbols, "Asase ye duru," is also one of the most commonly found wrought iron designs. "Asase ye duru" translates as "the earth has weight." This image is from a doorway located at 710 Royal Street in New Orleans. As with most Adinkra symbols, "Asase ye duru" is accompanied by a proverb: "All power emanates from the earth," or "Tumi nyina ne asase." The implications of this proverb are that wealth arises from the conscientious care-taking and conservation of the earth.



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tional identity increased when workers made iron with methods based on African traditions" (Libby, 1991.) The contributions of African ironworking to the culture and development of American wrought iron design is further detailed in two books: *Negro Iron Workers in New Orleans, 1718-1900*, by Marcus Christian: Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Co., 2002, and, *Forging from sun-up to sun-down: African symbols in the works of Black Ironworkers in New Orleans (1800-1863)*, by Eva Regina Martin: Temple Univ., 1995.

Adinkra means 'farewell'

In the West African country of Ghana, by the mid-1800's, Adinkra symbols originally created out of reverence for ancestors and incorporated into clothing began to be incorporated into metal. Adinkra means farewell. The myth is that the first Adinkra symbol, a series of three concentric circles fitting one inside another like

ripples, was created in honor of a deceased Ghana king.

Like hieroglyphics, single, individual Adinkras often symbolize complex messages. Just as in the hand of the ironworker from the unformed will come something finished, the twists and turns of iron that decorate homes and businesses all along the Mississippi Delta contain more than pretty curves and lines; they contain the complex symbols and proverbs workers from many different cultures carried with them. The messages of those who traversed continents and traveled across oceans (either because travel was forced upon

them, or because they traveled of their own free will) are retained in the structure and shape of American wrought iron. What has been retained from these cultures, and the messages contained in the complex relationship of fire, hammer and anvil, decorates our modern way of life and this amazing melting pot that is America. ✨



"Dwannimmen" symbol.



"Dwannimmen," translated as "ram's horns," is another commonly found design. This image is from the Xiques House located at 521 Dauphine Street in New Orleans. This symbol is accompanied by the proverb "Dwannini ye asisie a, ode n'akorana na": "It is the heart and not the horns that lead a ram to bully." Ironically, in the case of ironwork created by enslaved artisans, this symbol is also equated with concealment of learning. Other meanings for "dwanimmen" include strength, wisdom and humility.



"Sankofa," translated as "return and get it," another prominently featured Adinkra symbol, is also accompanied by a proverb: "Se wo were fin a wo Sankofa a yennkyi." This proverb translates "It is not a taboo to return to fetch something you forgot earlier on." This image depicts the two "Sankofa" symbols found at the tops of the spires of the St. Louis Cathedral, located on Jackson Square in New Orleans (the symbol "Asase ye duru" can also be seen on the spire between the two "Sankofa" symbols.) Among other things, "Sankofa" is equated with the phrase "better late than never," and, the belief that, by carrying the ancient into the present and then on into the future, it is possible to correct mistakes made in the past.



"Nyame dua" literally means "tree of God" and is associated with blessings. This image is from a balcony located at 713 Camp Street in New Orleans. According to W. Bruce Willis, author of *The Adinkra Dictionary*, "The Nyame Dua is a sacred spot where rituals are performed. Erected in front of the house or compound, it is crafted from a tree that has been cut where three or more branches come together. This stake holds an earthenware vessel filled with water and herbs or other symbolic materials for purification and blessing rituals."