

Fire and Forge

Birmingham, Alabama, turns iron and steel into cultural gold.

By Joel Groover

Illustrations by Vernon Carne

Fire looms large in the histories of many Southern cities—a fellow named Sherman guaranteed that. But nowhere in the South is the *creative* power of fire more readily understood than in Birmingham, Alabama. The Magic City, which grew “like magic” from its birth in 1871 until the dark days of the Great Depression, owes its rise to the fiery glow of molten metal.

Nestled in the Appalachian foothills amid rich veins of coal, iron ore and limestone, Birmingham’s burly mills churned out enough iron and steel to reshape a sleepy Southern hamlet into a formidable industrial center. By the arrival of the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, a boastful Birmingham could unveil a fitting new municipal symbol: a towering image of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire, that stood 56 feet tall. It

was the largest cast-iron sculpture in the world.

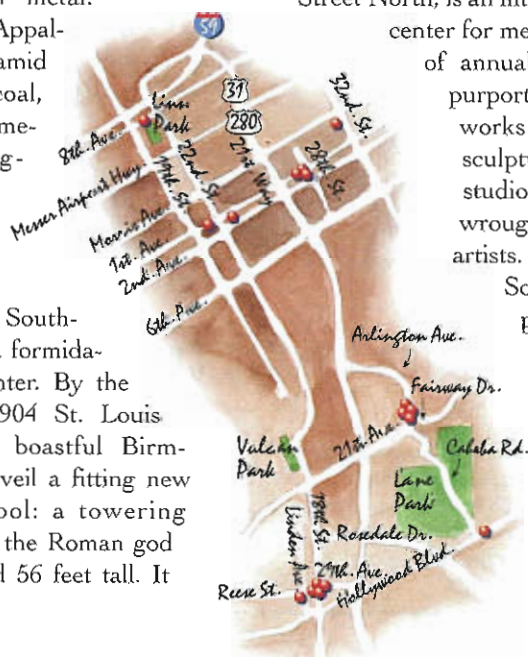
Rivers of pig iron stopped flowing through Birmingham’s famous Sloss Furnaces in 1971. But the towering smokestacks still draw devotees of fire and forge: Today, **Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark**, 20 32nd Street North, is an internationally known center for metal arts. Thousands of annual visitors tour the purportedly haunted ironworks—now the site of sculpture classes and art studios—and buy handwrought objects by local artists.

Some might be surprised that art has replaced industry at the heart of this former steel town (population 1 million), but creative works abound

elsewhere in the city as well. In Birmingham, collectors can find jaw-dropping French furniture with six-figure price tags or exquisite art glass straight from Venice or Seattle. They can marvel at one of the world’s best collections of Wedgwood at the Birmingham Museum of Art, then stop by folk-art visionary Joe Minter’s sculpture-filled yard—a three-dimensional discourse on race relations and American culture.

To explore Birmingham firsthand, the best approach is to buy a map and rent a car. The city’s galleries and antiques shops occur in small clusters either downtown or in nearby suburbs. Downtown—an 85-block grid divided into streets and avenues—is a logical place to start.

On the north side is a must-see: the **Birmingham Museum of Art**, 2000 Eighth Avenue North. This highly regarded institution is the largest municipal art museum in the Southeast. Its permanent collection of more than 21,000 objects includes avant-garde contemporary works, the finest collection of



Birmingham Checklist

Area code 205

- **A.D. Antiquity**, 2841 Culver Rd., Antique furniture, paintings and accessories from Europe. 870-4842.
- **Amanda Schedler Fine Art**, 1825-A 29th Ave. South. 870-4772.
- **AMW Inc.**, 1829 29th Ave. South. 870-3588.
- **Antique Nature Prints**, 2841 Balmoral Rd. Fine examples of antique nature prints from the 18th and 19th centuries. By appointment only. 251-7353.
- **Architectural Heritage**, 2807 Second Ave. South. 322-3538.
- **Bare Hands Gallery**, 109 Richard Arrington Jr. Blvd. South. 324-2124.
- **Birmingham Museum of Art**, 2000 Eighth Ave. North. 254-2565.
- **Bridges Antiques & Decorative Arts**, 3949 Cypress Dr. and 2807 Second Ave. South. 967-6233.
- **Centuries**, 2828 Culver Rd. Primarily European furniture, 18th to 20th centuries. 879-2295.
- **Europa Antiques**, 1820 29th Ave. South. Antiques, flowers and event planning. 879-6222.
- **Gallerie Alegria**, 600 Olde English Ln., Ste. 128. 868-9320.
- **Gallery Terrence Denley**, 1930 Cahaba Rd. 871-5515.
- **Hawthorn Gallery**, 81 Church St., No. 104. 879-2588.
- **Homewood Art Gallery**, 2801 18th St. South. Fine, traditional oil paintings. 871-4136.
- **Jackson Galleries**, 2227 First Ave. South. 714-9933.
- **The King's House Antiques**, 2418 Montevallo Rd. 871-5787.
- **Les Trois Marché**, 2008 Cahaba Rd. 879-7208.
- **Littlehouse Galleries**, 2915 Linden Ave. 879-4186.
- **Loretta Goodwin Gallery**, 605 S. 28th St. 328-1761.

- **Macassar**, 1905 Cahaba Rd. 20th-century design from France, Italy, Belgium, Africa, the United States and Scandinavia. 423-9200.
- **Maralyn Wilson Gallery**, 2830 Sixth Ave. South. 322-4141.
- **Mary Adams Antiques**, 1829 29th Ave. South. 871-7131.
- **Mary Helen McCoy Fine Antiques**



Clockwise from above: A Regence-period buffet à deux corps, c. 1715-23, at Mary Helen McCoy. Stephen Rolfe Powell's "Prevailing Manic Jones," blown-glass, at Gallerie Alegria. D.G. Elliot's lithograph of a work by wildlife painter Joseph Wolf (1820-99), at Antique Nature Prints.



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