

Ornamental  
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Metal

# Fabricator



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# New York metalsmith boldly takes on new challenges



Unloading the casting for the Safra Synagogue doors.



Setrak Agonian at work at his shop office in Woodside, NY.

## ■ Setrak Agonian and the staff at International Creative Metals show a passion for tackling large and complex projects

By *Todd Daniel*  
*Communications Manager*

**Setrak Agonian**, CEO and founder of International Creative Metals Inc. (ICM), is a man with a story to tell.

A machinist, welder, and blacksmith, Setrak began his career at a young age in Bulgaria. Several years later he emigrated to the U.S. with six dollars in his pocket and a sick mother. A proud Armenian, Setrak brought to this country his Old World metal-smithing skills and strong work ethic. And most importantly, he brought with him his life-long interest in machinery and his passion for finding ways to do things better.

And that is where the story begins. A highly regarded metalsmith with a wall full of plaques and honors, last fall I had the opportunity to visit this long-time NOMMA member. During my talks with Setrak a common theme continually came up: The importance of education and continually learning!

The result of Setrak's lifelong quest for knowledge is reflected in every aspect of his business. ICM is a high-end architectural metalworking firm that has a zeal for taking on difficult jobs. Proficient in bronze, the

company regularly incorporates the latest technologies to produce outstanding projects. Located in Woodside, N.Y., a section of Queens, the company's work can be seen throughout New York City as well as far away places like the United Arab Emirates.

During one of our interviews, Setrak recalled the time in 1976, just three years after his company's founding, when he traveled to a machine show in Chicago. For a man who had grown up doing everything by hand, Setrak was amazed at the ingenious laborsaving machinery he saw at the show.

"I grew up in Bulgaria and as a 13-year-old blacksmith, we did all our work the old fashioned way. I put the metal in a vise, and filed, drilled, and formed everything by hand." But at the show, he discovered machines that could cut heavy plate, punch holes, and more, all automatically. He was particularly impressed by one German machine that could easily do tasks that would normally require him hours to do by hand. Setrak returned to New York with not only new equipment, but many new ideas as well.

As the years went by, Setrak remembered the things he discovered at the show when certain job requests came up. One day, a

### *For your information*

#### **About the company:**

International Creative Metals Inc., 37-28 61st St., Woodside, NY 11377-2538. *Ph:* (718) 899-7306, *Fax:* (718) 565-0854, *Email:* icmetalinc@msn.com, *Web:* www.icmetal.com.

#### **Company specialties:**

Proficient with bronze, specialty items, ecuminical, gates, doors, fencing, handrails, restoration, etc. Provides in-house design and engineering. Experienced with advanced finishes, including patinas.

#### **Noteworthy jobs:**

Safra Synagogue doors, Church of St. Ignatius Loyola restoration, Arlington National Cemetery Amphitheater, National Library sculpture, Abu Dhabi, Arab Monetary Fund Building bronze logo, Plaza Hotel elevator doors, etc., Rockefeller Center doors, Explorer's Monument in New Hyde Park.

historian artist approached him and requested a series of images that needed to be cut from bronze and embedded into a floor. It was the early 1980s, and in those days such work was typically done with a band saw, but Setrak remembered a waterjet system he had seen at the show. In no time at all, he was able to outsource the work to an East Coast waterjet cutting firm with spectacular results. "The man came over, put on his glasses, and was amazed at the perfection of the job," he said.

**Using technology**

Today, his firm uses AutoCAD and CNC cutting, and they regularly integrate new technologies into their projects. For instance, a proposal recently made for a police memorial included laser etching.

"For everything you do in life you have to have a vision," he says. "When I have a vision and get a new job, immediately the computer in my mind starts working and I start planning out how I

am going to do this job, and I start to form a picture of us doing this job and figuring out what type of tool I'm going to use. The whole idea is to determine the instrument that I'm going to use to do the job in the quickest, safest, and most productive way."

The results of Setrak's "visioneering" approach can be seen in some of his most outstanding projects. For instance, the company recently received a 2007 gold Top Job award for a massive set of bronze doors that were fabricated for the Edmond J. Safra Synagogue in New York City (see pg. 54). One of the most challenging features of this job is an internal steel doorframe that is embedded into the floor, walls, and ceiling. The frame and hinges, which support the massive 18-foot doors, are so precise that I was able to easily open and close one of the



Members of the ICM team lay out a job.



Setrak unveils a proposed design for a memorial that honors fallen police officers in Manhattan's 17th precinct.

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## Safra Synagogue Door Project

International Creative Metal received a 2007 gold Top Job award for this set of 18' high bronze doors. The doors adorn the Edmond J. Safra Synagogue in New York City.



TOP: The door frames are assembled in the shop.



LEFT: The castings are carefully measured.



TOP: The ornaments on the front side shell were cast using a loose wax bronze casting and finished to a dark brown patina. The design, which depicts the Jewish Tree of Life, was done by the well-known French architect Thierry Despont. Getting the casted sections to look like a single piece was a challenging part of the job.

LEFT: A close up of the casting shows the meticulous detail in the tree design. The casting contained holes that had to be filled and other imperfections that had to be corrected.



A special frame was embedded in the floor, walls, and ceiling to ensure that the doors would open and close flawlessly, with no vibration or space gaps. The floor piece had to be a perfect 90 degrees, and getting the entire frame precisely aligned was one of the greatest challenges of the job.



BOTTOM: The doors were assembled in the shop prior to final installation. The inner panels are a piece of art themselves, and are clad with muntz metal sheets, given a satin finish, and oxidized in a light brown.

huge doors with the palm of my hand. Another marvel of this job are the tree castings on the outside of the door, which are so well aligned that the design looks like a single piece.

In addition to regularly attending machine shows, Setrak also keeps himself educated by studying catalogs and advertisements, and doing a lot of reading — he particularly enjoys *Fabricator* magazine. “That’s why I’m a member of NOMMA,” he says. “When I open the magazine I see my experienced colleagues, and I can see what they have done and how they do it, and it raises ideas in my head.”

### A full service shop

The work of ICM covers the full gamut of ornamental and architectural metalwork, and includes bollards, memorials, gates, doors, fences, railings, light fixtures, grilles, restoration, sculpture, and religious ornaments. Some of the company’s most famous jobs include the bollards for Arlington National Cemetery, a courtyard sculp-



The staff of ICM proudly display the organization and storage capacity of their new installation truck.

ture for the National Library in Abu Dhabi, and the elevator doors at the Plaza Hotel.

One of the company’s most outstanding jobs is a pair of 30-foot bronze gates, each weighing 25 tons, that were crafted for the royal palace in Abu Dhabi. Fabricated in the early 1990s, the project has been the subject

of a 13-year legal dispute, and they remain stored inside the ICM shop. Despite being in the shop for over a decade, when I flipped back the protective plastic, I was thrilled to see that the massive gates still had their shiny luster. While the dispute remains unresolved, Setrak is hopeful that a political solution will soon be reached. The

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long-standing disagreement, which centered on major design changes ordered by the architect, forced his company into Chapter 11 in the mid 1990s, and the road to recovery was long and challenging. Setrak credits his wife Didi, who serves as business manager, and his friends at the Kiwanis Club for

helping to save his firm from bankruptcy.

Even during my visit in September, the company was continuing to take on new and interesting projects, such as a plaque display for a shipping company and a memorial wall for the New York Police Department's 17 Precinct.

**If you spend time** with him, you will learn about his early days as a blacksmith and how he came to America, where he started out as a machinist and eventually started his own business.

As I continued to talk with Setrak and followed him on visits to clients, I learned that he had more than one story to tell—in fact, Setrak has many stories. If you spend time with him, you will learn about his early days as a blacksmith and how he came to America, where he started out as a machinist and eventually started his own business. His life is a textbook example of how a young immigrant found success through hard work and persistence.

### Giving back

In addition to the importance of continually learning, Setrak says it's also important to always give back. He has exemplified such a spirit of giving throughout his life. Setrak's other love, in addition to metalwork, is sports. A long-time member of the New York Athletic Club, he has been involved in amateur wrestling throughout his career, and he is internationally recognized for his accomplishments in this area. For instance, he helped get wrestling included in the 1998 Goodwill Games, he is past president of the Metropolitan Wrestling Association in New York City, and in 2003 he was named Man of the Year by USA Wrestling, which is the national governing body for amateur wrestling. In earlier years, he helped to promote world friendship by setting up wrestling competitions between the United States and teams from the former Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and Armenia. His other outlet for giving back is the Kiwanis Club, where he is a long-time member and former president.

"I invest my time with people who do good things," Setrak says. "That's why I'm a member of the Kiwanis Club. We do good things for the community."

He has a special place in his heart for young people, and he expresses



This attractive "Memorial Wall of Honor" was crafted for the Traffic Control Division of New York City's Police Department.

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LEFT: The work of ICM can be seen throughout the New York City area. Shown is a memorial plaque.



RIGHT: Team members install an art piece during a restoration project.

**“When somebody reads** about something I’ve done or sees something I’ve made and admires it, I hope to be remembered and I hope others will learn something from me.”

concern for the state of education in today’s society. “Young people should realize that, without education, you cannot even be a janitor anymore. Computers are going in everywhere and in our business, the computers are even in the machines, and you have to tell the machine how to cut a piece. If you know the old way AND the new way, you’ll be very successful.”

**Looking ahead**

No longer the once-young wrestler and boxer, Setrak is now facing the prospects of eventual retirement. “My mission is not to glorify Setrak Agonian,” he says, “But when somebody reads about something I’ve done or sees something I’ve made and admires it, I hope to be remembered and I hope others will learn something from me.”

An example of kindness and dignity, as well as passion and compassion, Setrak represents the very best of the metalworking trade. His energy, appetite for knowledge, and love for challenging work is both inspiring and contagious. As I left his shop, located just outside Manhattan, I thought about how to best end the story I had just heard. Then I remembered something Setrak had said during our interview that said it all: “I am Setrak Agonian, a craftsman and a sportsman.”

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