

# Chicago Trophy Company Is Cast in a Winning Role

*It is only 13 inches tall, but the eight-pound statuette—with its gleaming 24-karat-gold finish—seems to dwarf the numerous other trophies in the room. It stands tall and proud. It is the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences award. It is Oscar.*

On the northwest side of Chicago, there is a 90,000-ft<sup>2</sup> manufacturing facility where artists and a team of production workers turns out a myriad of impressive trophies and awards. R.S. Owens & Company is the world's largest complete manufacturer of awards, from raw material to finished product. In-house operations include design, artwork, mold-making, spinning, hand-casting, die casting, centrifugal casting, polishing, plating, woodworking, silk screening, acid etching and engraving. All kinds of trophies, statuettes, plaques and awards are produced at the shop, but once a year—amid great pomp and circumstance—R.S. Owens unveils its most famous product: the star-studded “Oscar.” Camera crews appear, spotlights are turned on and the red carpet is rolled out in preparation for Oscar's impending trip from Chicago to Hollywood.

When the company began in 1938, however, it was with a little less glitz and glamour. According to owner Owen Siegel, his father Charles founded the company as a pigeon (that's right—pigeon) supply business. As a teenager, Owen helped his father in the business. Occasionally, the elder Siegel's clients would request trophies in order to honor their racing pigeons—or their best-of-show rabbits, chickens, canaries or guinea pigs.

“One day,” he said, “my father sent me into town to pick up two trophies he had ordered. The trophy company thought I was a dealer and gave the pieces to me for the wholesale price. I ended up making \$8 profit on the deal. This was during the Depression years, you understand, and \$8 was

as much as I normally made for two weeks' work.” Owen recognized the opportunity immediately, and began focusing his efforts on the trophy business—a decision that continued to prove quite profitable.

## Behind the Scenes

Although Oscar brings R.S. Owens the most notoriety, producing approximately 60 of those 24-karat gold-plated statues each year could never keep the company's more than 200 employees busy. The majority of their business comes from manufacturing numerous awards and trophies—many of them famous and others quite obscure. Each job, from Clios, Emmys, Super Bowl trophies and MTV Music Video awards to hundreds of other cast-metal trophies, comes with its own set of production challenges. The Oscars, for example, are multiple-plated, requiring dips in chemical solutions and washes in sulfuric acid. The Emmys are even more complex, with a sphere of copper rings that must be individually cut and welded together. The MTV award (a lunar astronaut saluting an American flag) has to be cast in four pieces and assembled by hand.

Two types of trophies are made at the facility: licensed and stock. Licensed trophies, such as the Oscars and Emmys, cannot be mass-produced. R.S. Owens can manufacture no more than the licensing company requests each year. (Sorry—you can't buy an Oscar for your mantel.)



*Owen Siegel holds an Emmy statuette, one of the more complex awards made at R.S. Owens. The figure's raised arms hold a sphere made of copper rings that must be individually cut and welded together.*

## Casting Oscar in His Winning Role

The Academy Award statuette was originally cast in bronze, which made it very heavy and quite costly. Today, a pewter alloy is hand-poured into Oscar's four-piece mold to form the core of each statuette. The mold is pre-heated, hand-clamped and inverted for the pour, and the casting sets immediately. After the "gates" are cut and any flashing removed from the figure, it is polished to a mirror finish prior to degreasing and plating. Electroplating with copper and nickel is followed by a silver flash and a 24-karat gold-plated finish. An epoxy lacquer is then baked onto the statuette to maintain its sheen.

During the entire process, each trophy goes through numerous buffings, filings, polishings and inspections. Each one also receives an identification number for security purposes, or in the event that a particular Oscar has to be replaced (lost, stolen or, as in one case, destroyed by fire).

Stock trophies, such as the familiar two-handled loving cups and standard figurines, can be ordered by anyone, anytime, in any quantity. There are also two types of stock trophies, according to Owen. "The less expensive stock trophies," Owen said, "are molded from plastic—school awards, Little League trophies, that sort of thing. We don't make that kind." Owens & Company caters to corporate businesses and professional organizations, and the company has a well-established reputation for the highest quality products.

Making a metal trophy from scratch is a very involved process, and can be quite expensive. Prototypes of requested awards are examined and evaluated for level of difficulty before cost estimates can be made. Then a model is sculpted so that all the pieces of the trophy "puzzle" fit together correctly, with no tolerance for error. Dies are then made if items are to be die cast and, if hand-cast, steel molds are used. After these steps are completed, hand-cast pieces are individually produced by filling the cavity of the mold with molten metal. The mold is then taken apart piece by

piece to reveal the cast piece. This process is repeated for each individual item, by hand. For large quantities, however (orders of 3,000 or more), die casting is handled by machine.

The plant is filled with workers at grinding wheels or with hand files, smoothing away excess flashing (spilled metal around the seams of the mold) and taking great pride in the individual works of art they are creating.



*The showroom shelves display awards covering a multitude of fields—sports, academics, associations, arts and entertainment, corporations—each with its own set of production challenges.*





*Attention to detail is foremost in the trophy-making business. Here, handles are being attached to standard loving cup trophies in the final assembly stage.*

Each Oscar sits on a base that is spun out of bronze and plated with black nickel-silver. (The base of the figure, by the way, represents a roll of motion picture film.) A zinc casting is then inserted into this base for added sturdiness. The two pieces—statuette and base—are then assembled into the finished product, which is 13 inches tall, weighs exactly eight pounds and is universally recognizable. Oscar then goes into a protective plastic bag and is packed inside a form-fitting syrofoam container for shipment.

Owen Siegel is proud of the trophies his company produces and, in his opinion, “there’s not a loser in the bunch.” He is particularly fond of the “Mr. Peanut” award given to retirees of Planters, and describes the Lutheran of the Year award as “a

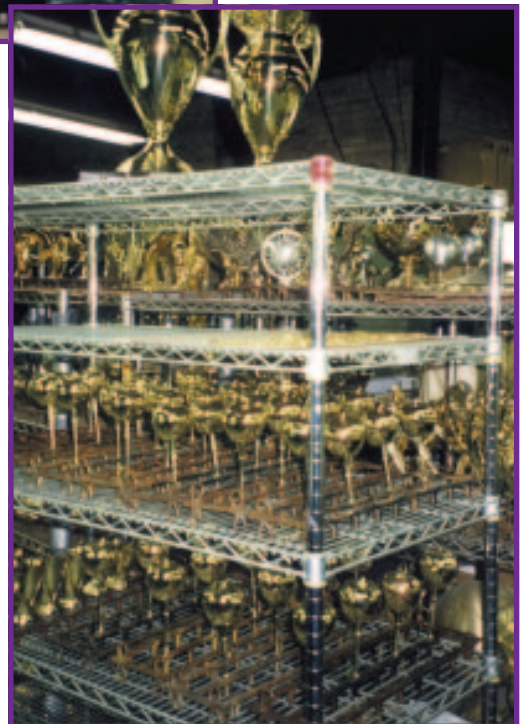


*Plaques are another lucrative product line at R.S. Owens. In-house craftsmen are skilled in numerous techniques in addition to plating, such as woodworking, silk screening, acid etching and engraving.*



*An impressive array of awards in various stages of completion line the storage racks in the facility.*

really fine work of art.” The shelves and display cases in the Chicago facility’s showroom gleam with hundreds of silver, bronze and gold figures—big and small, simple and complex. You can be sure that the products of R.S. Owens & Company grace the mantels of the rich and famous, as well as those of ordinary people, both young and old. They all have one thing in common: At a very special time in their lives, they each took center stage and were presented with an award-winning work of art. Owen Siegel knows his trophies help commemorate those memorable moments—and for that he deserves a standing ovation. *P&SF*



## Edits & Out-takes

It is interesting to note that during World War II, Oscar’s composite materials fell into the category of essential war materials, so the award was temporarily cast in plaster. After the war, the plaster statues were exchanged for the “official” models. The only other exceptions to the Academy’s award specifications occurred first in 1937, when a wooden replica of Oscar, complete with movable jaw, was presented to ventriloquist Edgar Bergen to honor Charlie McCarthy, his puppet sidekick.

The following year, the Walt Disney tribute to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* came in the form of one large Oscar and seven smaller statuettes.