

The local artisan behind Putnam's 3 new downtown sculptures

 theday.com/news/912416/the-local-artisan-behind-putnams-3-new-downtown-sculptures

By Sara Bedigian Day Staff Writer

July 31, 2026



Michael Saari works to complete the first of three sculptures for downtown Putnam in his Woodstock studio on July 21, 2026. (Sara Bedigian/The Day)

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Putnam — Michael Saari has created art and taught classes across the world, but always returns home to his studio in Woodstock to perfect his craft.

His next project is creating three sculptures along Putnam's Main Street. The first, an iron-and-steel "Jack and the Beanstalk"-inspired sculpture, is almost complete and will be installed in mid-August.

When designing the structures, Saari said, he thought about Putnam, choosing themes that he thinks embody the town and its history.

Saari chose the subject of the first sculpture due to the character's theme of growth and discovery.

"I always was fascinated by the story of Jack, and I said that's perfect for the idea of (the town), they want people to come and look and explore Putnam," Saari said.

The second sculpture will honor Putnam's role in the textile industry in the 19th and 20th century and as home to the U.S. Button Corp., a major domestic manufacturer producing military buttons. Saari said he is brainstorming a silk thread and spool, which he will begin creating soon.

The third sculpture, Saari said, will be a woman with shopping bags in her hand because of the several shops and dining establishments in town.

Saari said the Putnam sculptures will be direct metal sculptures, meaning he creates them by working directly on the raw metal — welding, cutting, heating and hammering. They will be made from iron and steel, which Saari said are the best materials to work with. The materials were donated by Rawson Manufacturing in Putnam, he said.

Saari said each sculpture takes around eight weeks to create. He hopes to get the second and third sculptures completed this fall.

Sheila Frost, an active member on the Putnam Arts Council's sculpture committee, spearheaded the project, bringing the idea to the town two years ago and putting out a national request for proposals to find an artist to do the work.

She said the weather-resistant sculptures will replace three overgrown patches on the sidewalk where trees and poles once stood.

Frost, the incoming president of the Putnam Business Association, is also the general manager at the Courthouse Bar and Grille, directly across from where the sculptures will be. She said she has always worked to keep the streets by her restaurant clean and wants to keep the area appealing to new businesses.

"I think when things look aesthetically pleasing, it's appealing," Frost said. "People want to spend time there. They want to come explore, shop and dine, so it means a lot to me to keep Main Street clean and looking attractive."

Saari's journey

Saari said he is glad to create the sculptures that will be displayed close to his home in Woodstock.

A master metalsmith for more than 40 years, Saari said he always loved tools and creating things, knowing from a young age that being an artisan, craftsman and blacksmith was what he wanted to do.

He enjoys reading, studying history, and visiting museums and hardware stores to learn and grow his craft.

“It’s the joy of creativity,” Saari said. “You’re not just trying to get from one point to the other — yeah, that’s important, you need to finish the project, get paid, but the actual process of doing it is a lot of fun.”

Saari has close ties to southeastern Connecticut. He worked for several years at Mystic Seaport Museum and was the lead shipsmith in the restoration of whaling ship Charles W. Morgan.

On the East Coast, his work includes restoring and reproducing historical pieces for Mount Vernon in Virginia and Trinity Church in Boston and producing 20,000 pieces of hardware for the Old Barracks in Trenton, N.J., according to his website.

He said one of his favorite pieces he created is a [large eyeglass sculpture](#) in Southbridge, Mass., to commemorate the town’s history as the former home of the American Optical Co.

He was one of many artists who helped create the [Bridge of Friendship](#), a metal sculpture installed in Aachen, Germany. He also has lectured at colleges across the country and taught classes at the WoodenBoat School in Maine. His next project is the restoration of a weather vane for the First Church of Christ Congregational in East Haddam.

While Saari has been a metalsmith for years, he said there’s always something new to learn.

“That’s another thing with artwork: It’s always some new thing to do or explore,” Saari said. “It’s a lifetime of learning and creativity.”

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