One of the more romantic features of the Metropolitan Museum is that it houses a real armorers’ shop. Although its domicile is not in soot-blackened, high-vaulted Gothic chambers but in sober rooms like laboratories, many of the tools and techniques used are centuries old, and the smith is still faithful to fire, the element of Vulcan.
Armorer’s work requires patience, knowledge of manifold techniques and materials, and a special touch, be it the measured stroke in polishing that gives a helmet or breastplate its prized luster or the untiring accuracy needed in caring for the 200,000 rings of a mail shirt.

At the right the Armorer is reriveting the leather straps on a sixteenth-century boy’s armor (both hammer and anvil stake are original tools, contemporaneous with the armor they help to repair), and at the left is illustrated the art of embossing, the most attractive technique used to decorate parade armor. The metal rests on a block of pitch, the yielding surface permitting the raising of prominent details with a punch. The actual embossing is done from the wrong side of the piece, but fine accents are chiseled in on the front.
Most of a modern armorer’s work is considerably less glamorous than that of his colleagues in the days of Lancaster and York. Now, above all, it is cleaning, keeping the polished surfaces and intricate hinges rust-free. The humidity and pollution of New York’s air poses quite a problem to the caretakers of the largest armor collection in the Western Hemisphere. This means constant checking, even of objects safely in cases, but special attention must be given to armor exhibited openly in the galleries. Though an armor plate was designed to withstand a sword stroke or the impact of a crossbow bolt, it is extremely vulnerable to careless handling. If only the curious visitor knew how easily his fingerprints become permanently etched into the steel, if not discovered and removed within hours!

Above: the leatherbound wooden grip of a sixteenth-century rapier is being meticulously wrapped with cabled silver wire. Right: a hauberk is about to be cleaned in the medieval way—by tumbling it in a barrel with a few shovelfuls of sawdust sprinkled with oil.
One of our restorers is a trained gunsmith, the other a skilled silversmith. The Armorer himself, with the Museum for forty years, learned his craft from masters who were links in a chain of tradition that can be followed back to the Middle Ages practically step by step.