

CSCL's NOMINATION STATEMENT FOR THE ONTARIO CRAFTS COUNCIL'S JOHN MATHER AWARD FOR RUTH M. HAIG, R.T., FCSCL (Life) Written and submitted by Dorothy McPherson, Director CSCL

This year, the Canadian Society for Creative Leathercraft (CSCL) will celebrate its 55th anniversary – due in large part to the untiring efforts of Ruth Haig, Hamilton leathercrafter.

Leathercraft in Canada reached its zenith in the late 1950s with 276 CSCL members distributed among seven branches throughout Ontario. The charm and beauty of leathercrafting caught Ruth Haig's attention and, in 1962, she joined the Hamilton Leather Guild, Hamilton Handicraft Guild (now the Artisans Guild of Hamilton) and CSCL (all of which she later went on to serve in an executive capacity). Then, for 8 years, she studied leathercrafting at Adult Education classes taught by Hamilton's renowned Irva Ford. CSCL interacted with the International Assembly of Leather Craft (IALC), situated in Buffalo, New York. The IALC disbanded in the 1980s, but prior to that, Ruth participated in these cross-border competitions and taught a workshop there.

This was during the Al Stohlman era when western style designs were in vogue, appearing on saddles, purses, belts and home décor items. They required intricate carving, manual strength, skill, tools, and heavy cowhide that retailed for 50 cents per square foot.

CSCL's membership had begun to decrease dramatically as its membership aged. The western look had gradually faded from favour except in saddlery resulting in fewer people practicing traditional skills.

Meanwhile, Ruth assumed executive roles with CSCL (including that of president) and now serves as Chair of Teaching Standards thus helping to maintain a high level of excellence: Carve crisp clear lines! Dye evenly! Burnish edges!

Whereas Ontario leathercrafters had used soft leather to create vests, gloves and wearing apparel the new availability of synthetic leather-look fabrics allowed anyone with a home sewing machine to quickly create the leather-look. As well, inexpensive leathergoods began to flood the market. The market for traditional leatherwork dwindled further and CSCL's annual booth at the Canadian National Exhibition, where Ruth volunteered committee time, was disbanded.

There were, however, several events that had a positive influence on leathercrafting in the province. One was the establishment of the Ontario Crafts Council (OCC) in 1976 and the opening of its retail location, THE GUILD SHOP, in Toronto. This focus on fine crafts helped shape the consumer's appreciation of fine arts. That led to leatherworkers being defined as "artists": a boost to the ego. Heavy leather sculpture, containers and masks came into vogue. These non-apparel items had a cleaner and streamlined contemporary appearance. Ruth adopted this new look in her work that retailed at TEXTURES, Hamilton, craft co-op. This international artist's involvement with TEXTURES began, by invitation, in 1983 when she became a charter member of the combined-effort craft gallery in Hess Village. Because of Ruth's support of fledgling crafters at TEXTURES many have successfully retailed their work there such as leathercrafter Lauchlin Harrison, Hamilton. He went on to receive a 2003 OCC Design Award and is now commonly known as THE MITT MAN.

Another positive factor influencing leatherwork in the province was the presence of the Haliburton School of Fine Arts. The establishment of HSFA provided an avenue for leather instruction and Ruth enrolled in several leather courses. There she studied wet and dry form boxes, her favourite technique, and went on to teach boxes at a Woodstock workshop.

Other influencing factors included the proliferation of medieval and historical re-enactment societies with their call for leather bustierres, gunpowder cases and mess kits. The commissioning by museums of historic reproduction pieces such as leather fire-fighting pails also spurred an interest in leather. The helpful instruction given to would-be leatherworkers at friendly TANDY LEATHER stores, such as TUNDRA LEATHER, Hamilton, has brought in new members.

However, this craft has, in recent years, been declining in numbers while the price of cowhide has been rising to \$8.00 or more per square foot. The public always expresses pleasure and surprise at exhibitions such as CSCL's 2004 Biennial, Hamilton Public Library, as evidenced in the GUEST BOOK comments: "Beautiful. Amazing, I didn't know you could bake, laminate, hammer, nail, and saw leather!" In spite of physical limitations that now prevent Ruth from doing leatherwork, she continues as an honoured judge at CSCL competitions such as the 2004 Biennial and the annual conventions.

Ruth's fine handwork has been recognized with numerous prizes and awards including: 20 CNE ribbons, Michigan Leather Award (1980), Irva Ford Memorial Award (Best molded leather, 1984), Robert Muma Memorial Award (Best tooled article, 1995), and numerous CSCL ribbons and prizes for excellence.

Throughout Ontario and also in Buffalo and Rochester, NY, Ruth conducted workshops – all the while enrolling in yet more leather courses under skilled crafters. She has long held the opinion that leatherwork should be a full-time course taught in community colleges and art schools.

Ruth has been a member of Ontario Crafts Council and Canadian Craft Council. She attended: the World Craft Conference, Vienna (1980); the Maritime Canadian Craft Conference (1982); the World Craft Conference, Vancouver, 1986. Ruth was delighted to have her first woven belt selected for inclusion in an OCC travelling exhibition in the 1960s.

In 1986 the Canadian Society for Creative Leathercraft honoured Ruth with an Honourary Lifetime Member Award and, in 2000, with an Ontario Volunteer Service Award recognizing "OVER 35 YEARS SERVICE". She has served faithfully and competently on craft guild executives and, as a strong advocate of crafting, her dedication continues, especially to the medium of leather. This Canadian heritage craft continues into the 2000s due, in large part, to the efforts of visionary people like Ruth.

For 43 years she has supported crafting on a local, provincial, national, and international level. Born in Mildmay, Ontario, in Bruce County in the early 1930s, Ruth became an x-ray technician and her work led her to Hamilton in 1960. In 1993 she retired as Director of Medical Radiography Services at DOFASCO Inc., Hamilton, after 23 years of employment. Ruth Haig's lifetime dedication to, and exemplary support of, the arts makes her a most worthy candidate for THE JOHN MATHER AWARD.