

Meet Bill Whittingham, an extremely gifted, award-winning leathercraft artist blending the functional and aesthetic to perfection - a friendly, caring person who shares his studio with two dogs: lively Amber, a Golden Retriever puppy, and senior Radar.

Leathercrafting, one of the world's oldest crafts, is steeped in history. Already the Neanderthals used animal sinew to lash the stone tips of spears to the wooden shafts. In addition, the early cave dwellers made their clothing and footwear out of leather. Leather also played, and still plays, an important role in the lives of our Native People.

The inscription above a museum entrance: "Craft is art made useful," comes to mind when looking at the high-level craftsmanship that this artist invests in his work. Each and every crafted piece is unique. Among the items that came from his hands are soft leather baby shoes, belts, wallets, purses, evening bags, colourful jewellery and exquisite jewellery boxes, fridge magnets, glass holders, napkin holders, leather wine rugs, and clocks. His commissioned works include intricate Bible covers (for Lodges), and a leather chess board with thirty-two double-sided figurines. These are based on Tolkien's "Lord Of The Rings". Some of these are coloured, and are inlaid with crystal. The delicate colour-shading of the leather has been achieved with the use of an air brush.

This young artist was born with talent in his genes. While at school, art classes, instead of being fun, were something Bill was required to attend. He never did anything in art until 1981 when his parents gave him a calligraphy set with which he, as Video Store manager, created signs. He then branched out into more artistic concepts, starting a Graphic Design business. He gradually moved into more challenging artwork, strictly for his personal enjoyment.

Bill actually stumbled into leathercrafting by accident. In 1985, dissatisfied with his job, he looked for alternatives. He had eight years of varied managerial retail experience when the Tandy Leather Company was looking for an assistant manager. He naturally assumed he would be selling leather jackets and accessories when he learned that it was a How-To Craft Shop - a brand new and interesting concept. Two hours after filing his application, he was hired as Assistant Manager. He was given a half-hour of instruction and then

did some work of his own under the watchful eye of the Manager. Three weeks later he was made Manager of his own store, and after two more weeks - with a total of five weeks 'hands-on' experience - was teaching leathercraft.

Also having to sell How-To books, he read thirty-seven of them within one month. Thereafter, he visited hospitals, schools, homes for the aged, and prisons, teaching leathercrafting while constantly spreading the word about this field. He intends to continue doing more extensive teaching so as to 'save' the craft for future generations, since there are few places that offer training. There is reduced course enrollment in this very time-consuming craft due to the Recession and costly investment in tools and materials.

In 1987, Bill joined the Canadian Society For Creative Leathercraft, a three-level membership Guild:

1) General Members; 2) Associates (having completed four compulsory items) and 3) Fellows, who function as Judges (status for

which Bill is presently preparing).

They conferred the Best In Show Award upon him for a special vanity mirror for which he also won the Executive Award in the Leather '94 Exhibition held in the Etobicoke City Hall.

This artist also won all three major awards

- a) Craftsman Award for technical perfection;
- b) Salon Award for creatively stunning and innovatively unique work for his associate's work-samples: a belt, canteen, bowl, and evening bag, and
- c) Zalitis Leathercraft Award for having passed the Associate's Exam with the highest mark.

Last year, Bill participated in the Visual Art Mississauga Valentine Show and ranked First Place in the craft division for his leather jewellery box. In 1994, he featured in a total of twenty-one different craft shows in Ontario. Presently, he is also doing jewellery involving feathers and semi-precious stones. As of April, 1994, Bill has been working on a full-time basis in his own business - a highly satisfactory, but challenging experience.

On the American continent, arts and crafts are still widely considered as a luxury. Daily survival is people's main concern. However, there is a ray of hope: those anxious to become leathercrafters can join the Guild and secure a three-hour monthly training, or intensive private tuition. ♦



Northern Lights Leathercraft
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