

FIFTY YEARS OF LEATHER ART

Leather can be boiled, baked, molded, stretched wet, cut, drilled and punched with holes, hammered, laminated, scored, carved, sewn, coloured and be made hard or soft. As distinguished leathercrafter, Irva Ford, describes it: "Leather is the undiscovered giant of design mediums."

Helping people discover this versatility is part of the mandate of the Canadian Society of Creative Leathercraft (CSCL). Celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, the Society has been working to raise the interest, appreciation and respect for leathercraft as a craft item and an art form.

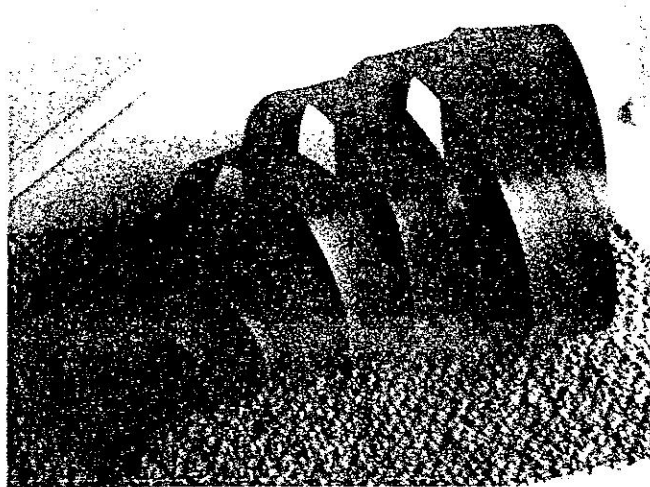
CSCL traces its roots back to June 1950, when seventeen leathercrafters met in Toronto to discuss the formation of an organization to encourage quality and originality of design in leatherwork. Up to that time no organization existed in Canada to deal with standards of craftsmanship or to teach leatherwork or display juried leather items. The founding members wanted to go on beyond the misconception that the craft only involved wallets, moccasins and comb cases made from kits. No matter how wonderful and functional they may be, there are greater challenges and accomplishments in leather to promote.

At the same time that standards for craftsmanship and design were developed so were the judging criteria for the Society's annual juried shows. In those early days, the high standards by which juried items are selected for awards were established including the colouring, tooling, stitching, overall design and functionality of a work.

With the standards in place, exhibitions featuring outstanding workmanship began with the first traveling exhibition—*Canadian Handmades in Leather*—that started its 16-month tour in February 1952. On invitation, it appeared at the Canadian shoe and Leather Fair in Toronto, and at M'Lady Fair in Montreal. The second travelling exhibition *Canadian Originals in Leather* started in March 1954 and toured 29 centres across Canada. As well, that year, an exhibition was sent to England where it received high praise. At the Pacific National Exhibition in Vancouver in 1962 CSCL was awarded the bronze medal the top award for leather. Since then regular juried shows have appeared throughout Ontario.

In addition, members have executed prestigious commissions honouring corporate, civic and royal occasions. Their works have also appeared in the Ontario Crafts Council regional shows and some members have been honoured recipients of the Council's design awards.

There are strong guilds worldwide, from the United States with its dominant western style to Japan where intriguing use of thin dyed leather over boxes is exquisitely presented. With this fine company, CLSC promotes Canada's unique style that reflects our diverse population with a combination of



David McPherson's *Cornucopia* (36 x 23 x 15 cm), a functional leather sculpture that can hold mail, fruit or dried flowers, received the Best in Show Award at the 49th CSCL Annual Show in 1999. It demonstrates the possibilities of creative expression with leather's versatility.

aboriginal, British colonial, Spanish and southwestern influences. Aboriginal buckskin and rawhide work has always been functional yet beautiful with ornamental fur, feathers, wood and, in later years, beads and metals. Along with this influence, Canada's colonial heritage added the of British style—unadorned but well made and finished, and above all, functional—to Canadian works. Finally, Spanish and southwestern styles introduced design to the surface of the leather resulting in the richly tooled and carved western pieces that we still see today. Now new technologies, such as glues, dyes and tanning techniques have further expanded the horizons of leather as a medium for jewellery, leather mache, airbrush colouring and more.

The Society continues its work to communicate the excitement of the medium, to encourage artists to create with leather and to invite you to participate in our 50th year as we share these ongoing challenges.

A special 50th anniversary annual meeting is scheduled for April 14-16, 2000 at the Quality Inn in Woodstock, Ontario. For the first time in years the meeting will be open to anyone interested in learning more about this versatile medium. The display of member works will open on Saturday, April 15. Of course, we always welcome new members, providing them with workshops and guild training throughout the year. For more information call Bill Whittington, president of CSCL, at 416/239-3743.

By Dorothy McPherson and David Windeyer. Both are CSCL Board Members and have a combined total of 20 years of leathercraft experience.