

Leather art

It's not just a cowboy craft

By Jacob Stockinger
The Capital Times

Is it art or craft? That's the question facing many leather artists, who often find their work rejected by galleries and museums.

But it's not an issue for Ann Waters, a leather artist in Fitchburg who is president of an international guild with 300 members and whose work is now on display in a local show of leather art.

"The Fine Art of Leather" runs through Dec. 10 at the Promega BioPharmaceutical Technology Center, 5445 E. Cheryl Park-



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Fitchburg artist Ann Waters — who portrays horses and American Indians — says leather is an underappreciated medium.

way, which turns east off Fish Hatchery Road right after Ea Paella Restaurant. The exhibit is open to the public free. Gallery hours are 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday. Call 277-2669 for information.)

As Waters sees it, the problem is that leather has a hard time living down its reputation as the source of belts, shoes and saddles.

"Leather is very versatile and these artists have used it in very different ways," she says.

Waters, who worked in gold and silver before turning to leather about five years ago, points out that leather art uses and fuses all kinds of traditional

artistic techniques from painting to sculpture.

"It's a much more complicated art form," she says. "You have to have a three-dimensional ability."

Her own work focuses on portraits of horses and American Indians.

"I like the interesting character of Indian faces," says Waters, who is part Sioux. "And I've al-

ways thought horses are the most beautiful creature on the planet."

The popularity of leather art is on the rise, she says.

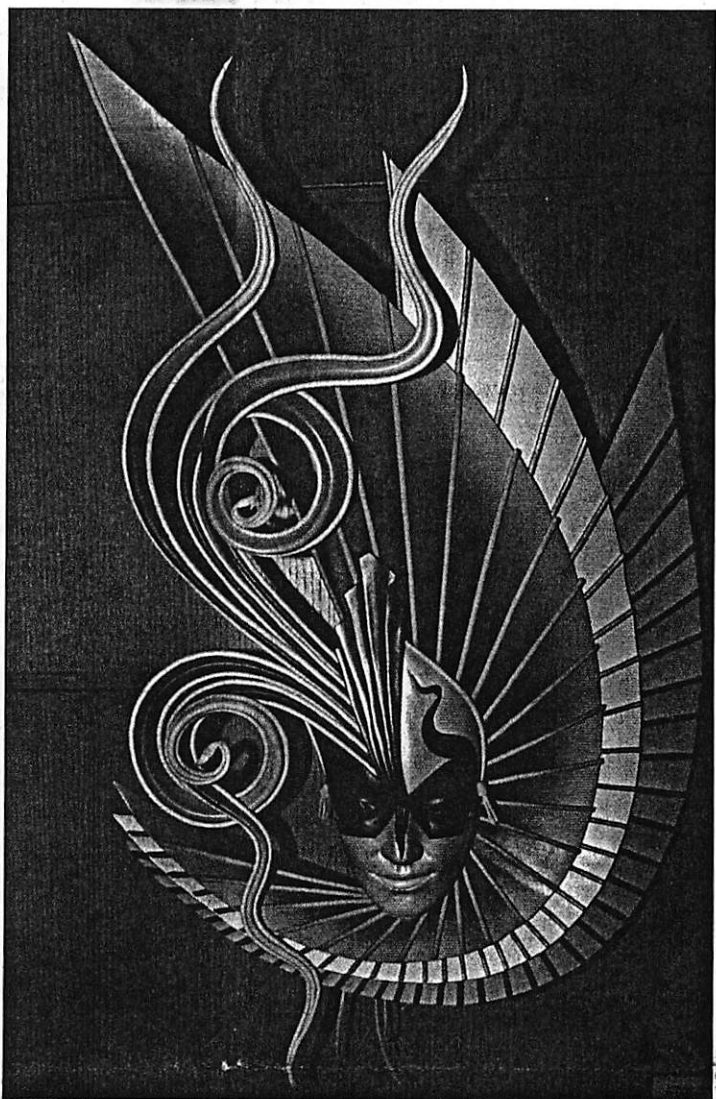
"Once they've been exposed to it, they like it," Waters says. "So we want as

many people as possible to come to this show. We want them to see what can be done with leather and see that it is a fine art form — and not just a cowboy craft."

"This is a very exciting time to be a leather artist," Waters adds.

"Galleries are filled with two-dimensional painting, and people are looking for something new. I think that within 10 years, leather art will be a major trend, a very hot item."

Maybe so, but right now leather art is so new that even experts and



JACOB STOCKINGER/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Australian artist Mike Taylor uses leather to create colorful and elaborate harlequin masks.

connoisseurs are not quite sure what to make of it.

Part of the challenge is that the work is all over the map stylistically, says Daniel Swadener, the chief curator of the gallery

who is based in Akron, Ohio, and who has been collecting art and curating shows for 25 years.

"Some of the artists are ready now for recognition from the art world and others have a long way

to go," he says.

He's right.

Some of the 60 works in this show seem classy, even classical.

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Leather

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Good examples are Mike Taylor's elaborate and fanciful masks; Garry Greenwood's musical instruments and boot-like shoes; and Bob Beard's jewelry and necklaces.

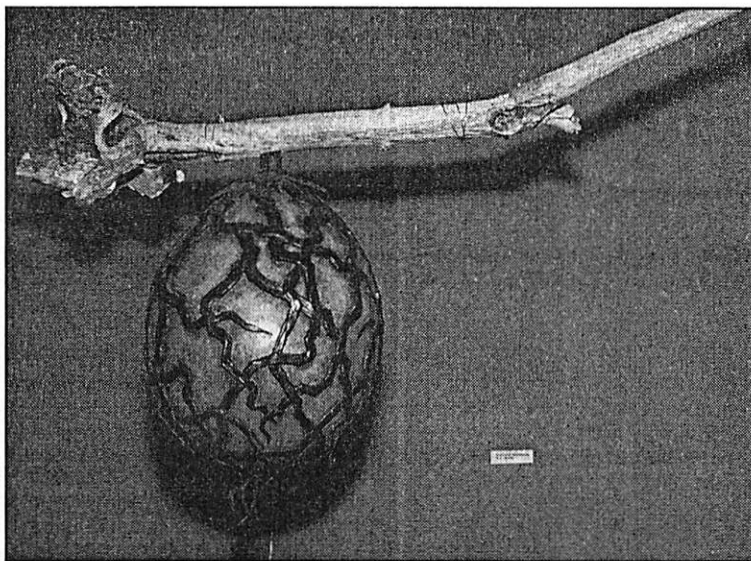
But other work is more akin to kitsch, even garage sale art or black velvet painting — such as Roz Kaohn's prize-winning grotesque and phantasmagorical images, with the dragon heads and contorted faces that you find in video games.

Some of the work relies on traditional inspiration as organic and old as the leather itself. These include American Indian portraits and wildlife images of animals ranging from bears, eagles and buffalo to giraffes and alligators. Much of that work tends to be representational — scenes of a herd of elk moving across a river — and looks like ordinary two-dimensional paintings from a distance.

Other work is quite abstract or conceptual, especially German artist Rene Berends' symbolic pod hanging from a dried branch and the fetishistic objects (using the artist's own hair) by Sioux artist Robb Barr of North Dakota, who is considered the grand master of the modern leather art movement.

Whatever the subject matter, the sheer technique of the work strikes the viewer.

"It's pretty fascinating what you can do with the material," Swadener says. "Even if the work doesn't appeal to you, you have to appreciate it and what goes into it. They've got new techniques to do things you never thought could be



JACOB STOCKINGER/THE CAPITAL TIMES

German artist Rene Berends uses leather to create an abstract pod (above) while Native American artist Robb Barr uses his own hair to create a fetish (right).

'It's pretty fascinating what you can do with the material. Even if the work doesn't appeal to you, you have to appreciate it and what goes into it. They've got new techniques to do things you never thought could be done with leather.'

DANIEL SWADENER

done with leather. I'm not even sure how they do it."

Some of the work, for example, looks as if it were built up through thin layers glued on top of each other, then whittled down. But in reality, Waters explains, the leather is stretched out from the back and then worked or formed.

Official acceptance of the medium is indeed coming, however slowly and grudgingly, Waters concedes.

There has been progress over the past 15 years, including shows and new professional organizations. And the work, including hers, is selling well, with prices for objects in this show running from \$700 to \$10,000.

Still, the need for more acceptance by both professionals and the public is one reason Swadener agreed to mount the leather show and let Waters choose the works.

He points out that fiber art used to face the same challenges, but is now an accepted medium.

Swadener also admits that viewers are likely to have very strong — and very divergent — reactions to the leather art on display. And that's just fine with him.

"When I hear comments from people saying things like 'I love it' or 'I can't stand it,' I feel I've done my job successfully," Swadener says. "Whether you love it or hate it, at least you won't forget it."

"I don't look to make sure everyone likes everything in an exhibition," he adds. "It will never happen. And besides, it's all a learning process."