

# Lisa and Loren Skyhorse, Saddlemakers

*This Colorado couple combines complementary talents for a signature style of cowboy's seat.*

BY CHASE REYNOLDS EWALD

When the Sheridan Saddlemakers and Leatherworkers Association organized a "Gathering of Masters" for its annual convention last year, they assembled twelve of the best leatherworkers in the world. Colorado saddlemaker Lisa Skyhorse was one of the chosen few, and it wasn't just her craftsmanship that distinguished her from the others. "I was the only woman," she says. "And I was so proud."

In a field dominated by men, the distinction wasn't earned overnight. Skyhorse has worked with leather since she was a young woman; even before she had finished college at UCLA, she had started a wholesale leather manufacturing business in northern California. By the time she was 24, she had 33 full-time employees. One day she realized, "It wasn't fun anymore. I didn't want to be a manager; I wanted to be an artist."

She has certainly achieved her goal. An artisan saddlemaker since 1972, Lisa Skyhorse and her husband, Loren, handcraft approximately 25 art pieces a year, working mostly on commission but also selling their one-of-a-kind designs through select venues such as the annual Arabian Nationals. Although the Skyhorses will consider almost any project in leather (and are currently at work on an entertainment center which showcases three six-foot-tall carved-leather kachina figures), saddles are their stock in trade and their passion.

Lisa has been a horse lover her entire life, and Loren was a government hunter who rode traplines and once managed a 26,000-acre cattle operation. After Lisa sold her manufacturing business, she apprenticed to master saddlemaker Lawrence DeWitt. "He was a wonderful saddlemaker, a wonderful man, a wonderful mentor," she says appreciatively. She opened a saddle shop in Aracata, Calif., and afterwards relocated to Mendocino. When Lisa and Loren met in 1972, he became interested in saddlemaking himself, and by 1976 Lisa was training him in the craft. (It turns out saddlemaking runs in the family. Today Loren uses tools that belonged to his grandfather, and his

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*A trio of Skyhorse creations, from top to bottom: Basketstamp Deluxe, Sweetheart of the Rodeo, and Buffalo Saddle.*

grandfather's grandfather, some of them 160 years old.) They homesteaded and raised their two children in northern California, and now live and work in Durango, Colo.

After almost 30 years, the Skyhorses have honed their teamwork to as fine an art as their saddlemaking, from vetting prospective customers to building each saddle in a cooperative process. "We're a good team," Loren says. "Lisa is very good at starting projects and is a very good artist. She does all the carving and all the tooling and I do all the braiding. I do all the coloring and assembling, and when I'm doing that, she's already halfway into the next saddle. In general, Lisa's a lot more involved with how it looks, and I'm a lot more involved with how it functions. Nothing goes out of the shop that we haven't both worked on."

Old-world craftsmanship techniques fused with the Skyhorses' distinctive style sets their work apart even from other masters. A Skyhorse saddle is distinguished by its eight-strand edge braid (in leather, which has been dyed black for contrast, or in silver), hand-engraved silver conchos, inset seats (leather, or Southwestern weavings made by a 74-year-old Navajo woman), and sometimes surprising subject matter. Motifs range from the traditional—acorns, for instance—to the nouveau. Recent projects include the Rainbow Goddess, which features the square-headed Hopi figure wrapped around the back of the saddle's skirt; her outstretched



SABIAN DURANGO, COLO.

hand, which would usually be holding the symbol of the four directions, presents a silver concho. In the Skyhorses' art, an age-old motif shows contemporary flair.

The "Buffalo Runner" saddle (referring to the name the Sioux gave their favorite hunting ponies) depicts Indian ponies and bison marching around its edges in small silver plates; the horse figures are exquisitely detailed down to the handprint figures in their rumps. Since the Skyhorses market to owners of Arabians, they've even made Egyptian-themed saddles, using brass instead of

silver and carving scarab beetles and Egyptian figures. Currently they're at work on a silver-laden parade saddle for the black Friesian stallion who appears in posters for the movie *Zorro*.

The artisans enjoy a challenge, says Loren. "The word 'custom' has been so overused. It may mean the saddlemaker has two or three general styles and tooling patterns. We have taken the opposite approach. We say, 'What have you always dreamed of riding?' And we will make it."

Although the saddles are meant to be used, and many are purchased by people who actually work with them (one, for instance, was ridden in an Olympic 100-mile endurance race), they often end up displayed in homes. "They're very rideable," says Lisa, "but when they're not being used, they're in collections or displayed in someone's living room."

"People do buy our saddles and decorate their homes with them," agrees Loren, "but you can still take them out and rope with them. Even the ones with silver, in their hearts they're still working saddles. We don't know how to make a mock saddle."

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