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Buckles, belts, boots... Southwestern accents await the creative touch of leather crafter Chris West, seen here in his Ventura workshop.

THE NEW WEST

A local leather crafter's wild ride.

BY KATERI WOZNY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIANA SCHULZE

Chris West is a man whose imagination runs wild. He is a big kid at heart, a leather crafter whose colorful home studio has a magic carpet bed hanging from the ceiling and a ladder ascending into a secret attic. Outside, there's a tree house and a walkway bridge over a small pond where fish swim and a shy turtle hides out.

It is a captivating scene. But what really draws you in is the smell of fresh leather.

"Once that smell gets into your head, you never forget it," says West, a 54-year-old Ventura native who has been working with leather since childhood. "To this day,

the first thing people say is, 'I love the smell of the leather.'"

In 2011, West founded his eponymous company, Chris West Originals, and got serious about selling his one-of-a-kind designs, which reflect Native American, Southwestern, and Western influences and make use of upcycled materials like harness leather, old cowboy chaps, textiles, buckles and reins, belts, spur straps, and saddle bags.

"For me, scavenging is fun," he says of prowling swap meets, yard sales, and the Internet in search of usable items. "It's about making something that is resourceful and original."



►► The "Colorado" clutch, made with rusty license plates and vintage serapes.

Growing up in the Ventura hills, West's creativity and dedication were influenced by his surroundings. His mother, Beverly, was an art major who sewed her own dresses; his father, Wolfgang, was an engineer who instilled the values of hard work and organization.

"When my mother would give me fabric scraps, I came to appreciate textures," he says. "My parental influences have to do with who I am and what I do now."

West was also influenced by the classic westerns and science fiction TV shows he'd watch with his brother. The two would play cowboys and Indians in the local hills, armed with .22 rifles as they searched for arrowheads, bones, and fossils.

But it was his mother's old boyfriend, also a leather crafter, who gave him his start, leaving behind scraps of leather for young Chris to practice with. "That was a pivotal moment in my life," he recalls, "because I later started making things for other people—things I could sell."

When it comes to fashion industry influences, he looks to designer John Dennis, an Ojai resident whose company, Sam Roberts LA, sells handmade and handpicked vintage clothing, cowboy hats, jewelry, and purses. "John has been very encouraging and influential. We help each other out," says West. "He's taught me the ins and outs of the fashion world."

Chris West Originals include boot purses, fringed chap skirts, buckaroo and frontier bags with bullet shell casings, custom leather cuffs, wine totes made from cowboy boots, wrist wear, leather/serape cuffs, and pony purses made from soft, smooth leather. Prices range from \$150 for a small serape bag to \$250 for a larger bag, depending on how much sterling silver is embedded.

"The serape bags are the most popular item because the colors are so bright and vivid," West explains. "It's tightly woven, and you can instantly tell that it comes

from decades past, yet the colors are still retained."

On average, it takes between two and five hours to create a single piece. According to West, his Palomino horse, Magnum, teaches him the necessary patience. "He's taught me not to rush ... Horses pick up on your energy easily."

West has also learned to listen to women about their fashion wants and needs: supple leathers, long fringes, light weight designs with no plastics. "I have learned that practicality is important to women if they are going to spend a lot of money on something," he says. "I like making fashions that are new and different, and that combine ruggedness with femininity."

West peddles his designs at fiddle festivals, country music performances, the Santa Ynez Valley Vaquero Show and Sale, and other similar venues. His wife, Claudette, helps boost interest by wearing Chris West Originals at shows. "The first show I ever did was at a street fair in Santa Ynez," West recalls, "and I remember getting mobbed by women who wanted to buy my boot purses. I was thrilled at the reaction."

In the future, he sees his business expanding into the high-end retail shops of outdoorsy hot spots like Santa Fe, New Mexico; Aspen, Colorado; and Park City, Utah. He also hopes to have his work featured in select fashion shows. "I want to establish relationships where they can get one-of-a-kind pieces and receive a nice return for themselves," he explains.

But it is the customers' thrilled reaction that gets Chris most fired up. As he puts it, "It feels good to come up with designs that women are really excited about." ▼

For more information, log on to chriswestoriginals.com or follow him on Instagram @chriswestoriginals.





ABOVE: Antique Saltillo fabric, tarnished Southwestern conchos, and an old gun belt take on new life as a "Gypsy Rose" chap skirt.

OPPOSITE: Works in progress. West blends stylistic ingredients from Western, Native American, and Mexican cultures into a uniquely Californian stew.