

True Texas II

Folk & Traditional Arts
from the Concho Valley
to the Rio Grande



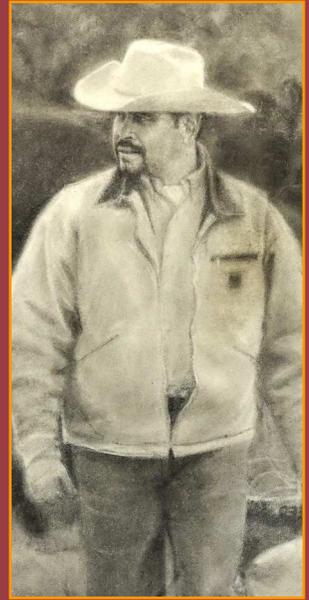
The handmade appreciation...in the ranch cowboy world, is I think, second to none.

It's your working/using gear that you're actually making a living with.

Grady Douglass

True Texas II





The tradition keepers featured in this exhibition booklet were showcased in the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts' *True Texas II* gallery exhibition in the fall/winter of 2022.

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An initiative of the
San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts

Text & Photography by
Douglas Manger

HeritageWorks
Publication

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INTRODUCTION

True Texas II: Folk & Traditional Arts from the Concho Valley to the Rio Grande

Be they forged or fired, etched or stitched, crocheted or woven, stamped or carved, this exhibit examines a rich cross section of artisan maker traditions that have been an integral part of the folkways of the region since settlers first arrived on the Texas frontier. Like an enduring drip of water on a stone, through the generations these maker traditions—often seen but unseen—have helped etch the defining characteristics of the region.

The term “material culture” refers to how objects are designed, made, and used, and what they mean to those who make and use them. “Material Culture records human intrusion in the environment,” says Henry Glassie in his book *Material Culture*. “It is the way we imagine a distinction between nature and culture, and then rebuild nature to our desire, shaping, reshaping, and arranging things during life. We live in material culture, depend upon it, take it for granted, and realize through it our grandest aspirations.”

Since the first settlers arrived on the Texas frontier, makers of every ilk, at every skill level, have been “shaping, reshaping and arranging” their work to fulfill a need. Migration to the Texas frontier began in the early 1850s when the Republic of Texas began granting free homestead tracts to American and

European settlers willing to brave a territory largely controlled by Comanches. The first permanent settlement in Concho County began after 1858, when the Butterfield Overland Stagecoach route began traveling through present-day San Angelo. Farther south, on the Texas-Mexican border, U.S. development on the north shore of the Rio Grande did not begin until after the American Civil War.

Land was the drawing card for early settlers; land to farm and to raise cattle, and later sheep and goats. As the population in the northern part of the region grew to 20,000 by 1900, concentrated around present day San Angelo, the demand for skilled craftsmen grew in kind: farriers to shoe horses; blacksmiths to mend farm and ranch equipment; gear makers to turn leather into tack, boots, chaps and chinks for the working cowboy ... sheep shearers ... butchers ... bakers ... tailors ... seamstresses.

As new settlements took hold, folkway traditions came to light...storytelling, foodways, music and dance traditions; cherished traditions borne in from home places back East or from the Old Country itself—or in the case of Del Rio, the Mexico heartlands. As for occupational folkways, embedded within were trade skills passed from master to apprentice, or in the case of domestic arts, home-craft skills shared and taught in family circles.

As you acquaint yourself with these tradition keepers, consider their shared aesthetic. The forms these makers adhere to remain predictable. This repetition of style in their work is an affirmation of tradition, yet some deviation is the norm as makers mature in their trade. Consider each work as a time capsule, of sorts, an embodiment of how-to memory, dutifully passed one generation to the next, one maker to the next.

The True Texas II initiative, sponsored by the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, honors the region's working folk and traditional artists of today. Be they boot-maker, quilter or artisan blacksmith, it is their distinctive work that contributes immeasurably to the character of the region. Accordingly, the Museum is committed in the long term to promoting the traditional arts of the region through a range of activities to include exhibits and workshops, and skills-preservation training programs with regional partners.



Tradition Keepers

Folk & Traditional Arts of the Concho Valley

- 1 Kevin Elkins, Silversmith, May, Brown County
- 2 Jeremy Balderrama, Duck Call Maker, Brownwood, Brown County
- 3 Bo McClellan, Woodturner, Brookesmith, Brown County
- 4 Gloria Barr, Landscape Painter, Richland Springs, San Saba County
- 5 Wayland Dobbs, Metal Fabrication, Cherokee, San Saba County
- 5 Travis Shannon, Deer Processing & Taxidermy, Cherokee, San Saba County
- 6 Jimmy Bray, Walking Cane Maker, Brady, McCulloch County
- 6 Karlton Steffens, Interpretive Designer, Brady, McCulloch County
- 7 Voca Quilting Club, Hand Quilters, Voca, McCulloch County
- 8 Chip Edmiston, Hatter, Mason, Mason County
- 8 Wayne Phifer, Artisan Blacksmith, Mason, Mason County
- 8 Charles Stuart, Mesquite Wood Sculptor, Mason, Mason County
- 8 Gene Zesch, Woodcarver, Mason, Mason County
- 9 Roxanne Fargason, Portrait Painter, Junction, Kimble County
- 9 Gary Neisemier, Western Gear Maker & Repair, Junction, Kimble County
- 10 Grady Douglass, Leather Crafter, Rocksprings, Edwards County
- 11 José Santos Gómez, Master Instructor, La Catrina Tradition, Del Rio, Val Verde County
- 11 Myles Jakubowski, Spinning Wheel Maker, Del Rio, Val Verde County
- 11 Isabelle & Leticia Ramos, Folk Crafters, La Catrina Tradition, Del Rio, Val Verde County

Map and table designed by Shaydee Watson

Kevin Elkins
May | Brown County
Silversmith

“They keep that family brand alive in the piece that I built for ‘em, and they wear it every day. So that connects them to their heritage.”



During summer months when the neighbor kids set off for baseball games with their ball caps, gloves and cleats, Kevin Elkins and his two brothers were off to rodeo geared up in cowboy hats, boots and spurs. Raised by their dad, a professional horse trader, by age twelve Kevin was spending summers breaking colts. In a territory where ranching was still a way to make a living, it all made sense. Later, when his dad started collecting spurs, Kevin took on the challenge to build them better. Now, thirty years on, he's still at it in his home workshop, turning out custom belt buckles, bits and spurs, conchos and jewelry for ranch hands and other working folk.



When Jeremiah Watt broke the trade secrets barrier with a series of how-to tapes on silversmithing, engraving, and spur making, “It kinda gave me a start,” Kevin recalls. “[Today] I kinda feel like it’s more of an obligation on our end to share our knowledge, because if not, this could die.” Prior to COVID, doing his part meant showing his work at Abilene’s Bit and Spur Show—billed as the world’s largest—for 27 years straight. Kevin’s process of “makery” is done entirely by hand; from cutting out the profile for a belt buckle on a flat piece of steel to the final stage of engraving. Once sold and in the hands of the new owner, Kevin’s custom work takes on a life of its own. In the end, Kevin makes no bones about it—although the work means something to him, what he is giving to the buyer will mean far, far more.

Jeremy Balderrama Brownwood | Brown County

Duck Call Maker

It's first light on Lake Brownwood. Tucked away in a side cove in his camouflaged kayak, Jeremy Balderrama begins to call the ducks in. "That's my all-time favorite part."

First introduced commercially in 1870 by Elam Fisher of Detroit, calls are an all-American art form. In Texas, Jeremy follows in the footsteps of two legendary makers. George Yentzen, and his assistant, James 'Cowboy' Fernandez, designed and patented the first double reed duck call in the early 1950s. Yentzen's calls would dominate the local and national market for the next 20 years.

With the steady rise in cost of quality duck calls, in 2013 Jeremy

decided to purchase a lathe to make his own. Today he turns both wooden and acrylic calls; and with his custom made jigs Jeremy is able to produce multiple calls all with the same sound. Given their density, Hedge (bodark), African Blackwood and Cocobolo are all good options for use in wooden calls. Arkansas-style calls are the standard design for modern duck calls with five main parts: a barrel, insert, tone board, reed and wedge.

To finish out his calls, Jeremy uses a traditional oil finish or thin coats of adhesive. Jeremy credits call makers Chick Major (Arkansas) and Jeremy Chinn (Tennessee) for their input along the way. Chinn was responsible for Jeremy's entry into the 2019 Reelfoot Working Call Contest at Reelfoot Lake in Tennessee. A surprise second place finish in the natural wood division has had Jeremy on Cloud 9 ever since.

"I could go out and not shoot a bird at all...as long as I could call and have some birds come in."



Bo McClellan Brookesmith | Brown County Woodturner

A shop-class assignment in middle school was his introduction to woodturning. It took time, however, for Bo McClellan to come full circle. Well into his career as a physician assistant, at the urging of his brother Bo took up woodturning in earnest. Today the McClellan home is graced with woodturnings in every room, a testament to Bo's dedication to the craft.

The origin of woodturning dates to around 1300 B.C. when the Egyptians first developed a two-person lathe. While one person turned the piece with a rope, the other used a sharp tool to cut shapes in the wood. The Romans improved the Egyptian design with the addition of a turning bow.

When harvesting the mesquite wood on his ranch, Bo looks for distinctive burls on the tree. "I look for these because I know something more figurative can be created from the wood." Once in his shop, with a block of mesquite cut to size, the incremental turning process on his wood lathe begins. Taking a month or two to complete a piece is not unusual, and shaping the work is a cooperative process with the wood: "You have to be flexible to let the wood tell you what it wants to do."

Like many makers today, to further hone his skills Bo takes full advantage of master classes available on the internet. "I just watch and get out there and start turning." While the act of creating with your own hands is exhilarating, Bo admits, so is the realization that you can make something others will love.



*"It's just an accomplishment
that you can make something
that others will love."*



Gloria Barr
Richland Springs | San Saba County

Landscape Painter



Late afternoon shadows bring scant relief from the summer heat in this rough-hewn part of the county. Gloria Barr grew up “the baby of four” in this territory, where exploring with her snake-hunting brother remains a treasured memory.

Gloria’s interest in art took hold when she began to sit in on her son’s art lessons. Working on her own at home, she then applied what she

had gleaned from his lessons. After years of teaching, in retirement, Gloria and a close friend began traveling to Seagraves, Texas, to take art lessons from J.D. Keel. Gloria later convinced J.D. to travel to the Barr home outside of Rochelle for a week at a time to give lessons to a group of seven ladies, all in their 70s and 80s. For five enlightened years the lessons would continue.



Gloria’s artwork centers on landscape and wildlife themes: an abandoned farmhouse with a windmill alongside; wild turkeys crossing a stream bed. After completing the initial sketch work in charcoal, she transitions to oils for the finish work. Her use of subtle purple hues has become a signature characteristic of her work.



In the words of Amy Fulkerson, formerly the chief curator at San Antonio’s Witte Museum, “Texas nature has been an essential muse for the state’s artists throughout its history. The Texas landscape has inspired generations of painters to artistically portray our state—to give us the look of the place and the feel of the place, the place we call Texas.”





Wayland Dobbs
Cherokee | San Saba County
Metal Fabrication

Independent to the bone, Wayland Dobbs follows in the footsteps of generations of Texas tradesmen—tradition keepers on the one hand, tinkerers on the other, always envisioning new possibilities. “Dobbs men,” Wayland says, “have always been backwoods engineers...craftsmen. Do-what-you-gotta-do-to-get-it-done kind of guy[s].”

Once ties to a steady job were cut, Wayland’s uncanny entrepreneurial skills kicked in. Starting small-scale, he built children’s toys for a time, then transitioned into fabricating wire brainteaser “disentanglement puzzles.” Finger puzzles have been around at least since 200 A.D. with some originating in China. Texas Rangers used a version of these puzzles to hobble their horses.



business nationwide, at one point his shop was turning out puzzles by the thousands in 30 different styles. After ten years, with business waning, Wayland turned to general fabrication work...from fancy ranch gates to fence lines. Always out for a challenge, he soon put his mind to building a giant spur. At 35 feet tall, weighing roughly 10,000 pounds, Wayland's "gal leg" Lampasas spur is acknowledged by Guinness World Records as the world's largest.

Today Wayland continues to revel in taking on design challenges that can easily take a year to sort out. With the aid of his 27-ton press to create a hand forged look, and a custom designed, lathe-mounted turning mechanism—cobbled together from recycled parts to twist pairs of 1-1/2" bars—Wayland is now able to create elegant flowing pedestals for his European trophy mount stands, his latest marketing venture.

Travis Shannon Cherokee | San Saba County

Deer Processing & Taxidermy



***“When the sausage is done
we get to go home at night.”***

At first light, Travis Shannon sets out on the ranch with his young son Brantley to scout for deer. Their morning ritual is telling. If Brantley remains true to the folkways of the region, hunting game in season will be a must.

No stranger to his trade, Travis began working with a local taxidermist at the age of 13. Out on his own, with taxidermy school behind him, Travis' mother-in-law helped fund his start-up business. These days, Roger Lawson, a long established taxidermist in Johnson City, remains a close friend and advisor.

During hunting season, business is non-stop. Prepping three or four trophy mounts is part of the daily routine, from native white tailed deer to imported exotics like axis, blackbucks and fallow.



After two weeks of dry time, airbrushing is the final step.

On the meat processing side, customers use cut sheets to order hamburger, steaks, chili, smokehouse sausage (20 to 30 batches on a good day), along with their ever popular “antelope eggs” (50/50 ground deer and pork meat, mixed with pepper jack cheese, balled, then bacon wrapped).



Cherokee’s small town atmosphere is what drew Travis and his wife back home after college, “I want[ed] to raise my kids in a good Christian town.” Many in Cherokee “do the ranches,” but have town jobs as well. “None of us have just one job,” Travis explains. “We try to work hard and I really feel like it pays off...working with my hands, doing this, is what got me here.”

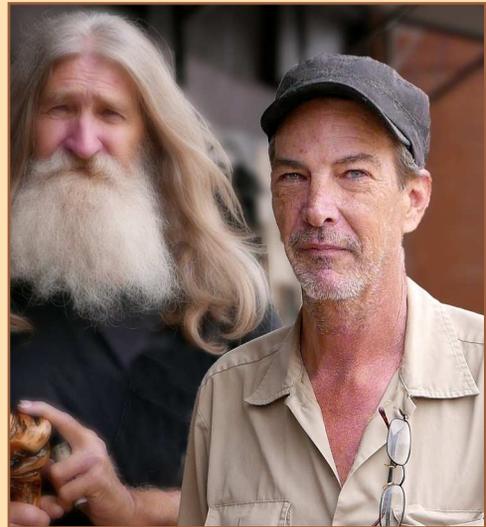
Jimmy Bray
Brady | McCulloch County

Walking Cane Maker

“The halt and lame still walk with their help. The young and hale still probe their way across mountain streams with hiking staffs.”

Edwards Park
Smithsonian Magazine

It's a quiet life for Jimmy Bray in small town Brady, but growing up was quite the reverse, with his father moving the family to new corporate postings around the globe. Jimmy's fascination with walking sticks took hold in Singapore when his Malay friends showed him how to turn a bamboo walking stick into a nip stick for carrying water. Today, when Jimmy crafts a walking stick, he is creating an expressive piece of folk art that combines form and



function. Adapted for the Texas landscape, a walking stick then doubles as a means to ward off a troublesome rattlesnake.

In the dry summer months, Jimmy heads for the shallow waters of nearby Lake Brady to harvest rootball-bottomed saltcedar limbs, those that will flex without breaking. With their distinctive brownish-purple coloration, once



air dried under his bed, then sanded and layered with coats of polyurethane—*voilà*—a new batch of walking sticks with root balls at the crown. To create “electric” patterns in his bamboo canes, Jimmy cranks up his transformer anywhere from 10 to 20,000 volts. The resulting arc that travels up and down the bamboo between two electrodes creates a highly stylized pattern.

With most given away, through the years Jimmy figures he has crafted between 400 and 500 walking sticks. Although his friends and acquaintances are “tinkled pink” to get them—in part because no one else has one like them—Jimmy questions if it will make him points in heaven. “I don’t know. It doesn’t really matter. It’s just something that makes me feel good.”

Karlton Steffens

Brady | McCulloch County

Interpretive Designer

When Karlton Steffen's great-grandmother opened her flower shop in Brownwood, Texas, in 1895, it was rumored to be one of the first in Texas. Four generations later, Karlton, now retired, has closed his Steffens Flowers location in Brady to begin designing his own unique arrangements using aged pieces of wood and shed horns found on West Texas ranches. Assorted flora and bird feathers are used to complete each arrangement. Karlton's use of "native treasures" is a testament to how one art form can inform and elevate another. Always in search of the unusual, Karlton roams miles on local ranches and delights when he finds a sun-bleached sculptural piece of wood resembling an animal or mystical figure, one that could only

have been created by Mother Nature. Once power washed, treated with pesticides, then sprayed with shellac or water sealer, the harvested pieces of wood are safe for use. Some 20 years ago, Karlton, who once lived and died deer hunting, put down his rifle and picked up a camera. After photographing one buck for seven years, Karlton used five of its shed horns in an arrangement, a testament--one could say--to the beauty of the fallen. As both a practicing florist and instructor, Karlton's father passed down the knowledge he had gleaned from his father. Today, Karlton's finesse creating rustic arrangements, mirrors his 50-year career in floral design. With eyes shining, Karlton reflects on the discovery pieces in his rustic assemblages: "Well, they just connect with one another, don't they?"



Voca Quilting Club
Voca | McCulloch County
Hand Quilters

*"I had to practice on a hoop maybe
nine or ten weeks, apart from the
group, until I got my stitches right."*

Lynn Hedges



On Wednesday afternoons, the community center in Voca comes alive with laughter as Voca Quilting Club members settle in for their weekly sewing circle. On the side table in their sewing room, photo books memorialize the club's 75-year history.

In the words of writer Marcy Thomas, "From repurposed feed sacks to the finest quality material, quilts tell stories of people and events, express their makers' artistic abilities and add comfort to life." In our region, where quilting circles abound, the tradition plays a central role in fostering a sense of community.

Voca quilts are sewn for members only. When next in

line, the member must provide the quilt design along with the fabric, though others gladly contribute fabric from their own "stash" if need be. With two quilts in progress at one time, it takes club members on average six to seven months to finish a quilt from cutting to sewing to quilting.

Maintaining a high standard for their stitchery is important to the club. Lynn Hedges practiced on an embroidery hoop, apart from the group for nine or ten weeks, until she got her stitches right. "Then they had to vote me in." In 1946, with 19 founding members, even if your stitches met approval, someone had to pass away or quit before another invitation was extended.

Chip Edmiston Mason | Mason County

Hatter



After settling in Texas in the 1890s, Chip Edmiston's great-grandparents began buying up land in Mason County, the same ranchland where Chip and his family live today. "Punchy" in a black beaver cowboy hat with a pecan colored ribbon-bound hatband, Chip champions the trade he has adopted. A visit to Spradley Hats in Alpine with his dad sparked his early interest in custom hat making. Today the Edmiston's' Western hattery, Bronco Sue, is Mason's latest success story.

Working cowboys have always needed cover to beat off the heat or cold. Over time the look and feel of the hat has become ever more important, as has the role of the hatter. For a felt hat, Chip's customers



select the beaver content they desire. A 100X body is 100% beaver. At 1000X, the top end, the choice is mink and beaver or pure chinchilla.

Once head size, desired material and color are determined, the order is placed. When the order is received, the customer's felt hat, at this stage termed a "blank," is placed in a steamer with a wooden block inserted inside dimensioned to the customer's head size. After the blank has been steamed, a hand iron is used to further tighten the fibers and smooth out the crown. With the sizing of the hat set, the wooden block is removed. Once the inner sweatband is sewn in, Chip, with a deft hand, then creases the hat to give it its own character. A Cattleman's Crease? Bull Dogger Crease?...whichever style will bring home a satisfied customer. "If they feel good about the hat, they are going to talk about it and folks will come to me to build them a hat."

Chip's early success in the trade comes as no surprise. "By following both of my grandfathers around all the time I just learned to do things...to do things on my own."

Wayne Phifer
Mason | Mason County
Artisan Blacksmith

"I enjoy a challenge. That's what keeps me driven. Something I haven't made before...and build it for people who appreciate it."

Once the Oklahoma horseshoeing school was behind him, Wayne Phifer headed back home to Odessa, Texas, to hang out his shingle. Six years later, however, after meeting artisan blacksmith Bill Epps in Fort Worth, Wayne's life would take another turn. Soon he was driving to Dallas on weekends to apprentice with Bill. After a move to Midland, while horseshoeing remained the bulk of his business, requests from local builders for railings, fireplace doors, and an occasional chandelier began to filter in. Frustrated at his slow progress and anxious for more challenging and lucrative commissions, Wayne decided to relocate to Vail, Colorado. After the move he was soon crafting one-of-a-kind fixtures for local high-end home builders. Though priced in the thousands, the unique look and quality of his work always met with an appreciative nod from buyers.

To up his skill level, at one point Wayne and a colleague were spending six nights a week, forging two to three hours a night, just to practice. As for his reception by the circle of world-class blacksmiths in Colorado? "Once they saw my work they accepted me into the group... from there I began doing forging demonstrations just all over."



Today at Ironton Forge in Mason, Texas, Wayne's specialty remains hand-forged ironwork; the "Old World hammered look" with parts forged then assembled using centuries-old traditional joinery techniques in lieu of welding. Through years of dedication to his craft, Wayne now ranks as a true master of the forge with commissions from clients from throughout the American West and Canada.

Charles Stuart
Mason | Mason County

Mesquite Wood Sculptor



In the words of historian Arthur Herman, “If you want a monument to the Scots look around you.” The dogged tenacity of woodcrafter Charles Stuart, a proud Scotsman, is right in keeping with the True Texas frontier spirit then and now. After visits to the Mesquite Festival in Fredericksburg, Charles was inspired to try his hand at crafting his own line of mesquite furnishings. “I just have to say the Lord brought me to [this].” Since 1997, his custom offerings have ranged from bedsteads, to chairs and tables, to his trophy stands of today.

Harvesting mesquite has its challenges. Taking good care with his protective gloves and snake gaiters on, Charles scouts for mesquite wood on nearby ranches. “I’ve only had one piece of clear [grained] mesquite in 20 something years.”

Charles describes how he creates one of his trophy stands. “The support pieces all have to work together with the same symmetry.” Reaching that point for Charles is a meticulous process that begins with sanding the piece—first with a belt sander, then with a palm sander—using finer and finer grades of sandpaper to end with a 600 grit satin finish or a 2000 grit glass finish. Afterwards, ten clear coats, give or take, are brushed on. In the end, if all goes as planned, once epoxied together the trophy stand will appear to flow naturally as all one piece.

With the setting sun, Charles, lost in time, toils on creating another master work with skills gained through trial and error over the past two decades.

Gene Zesch
Mason | Mason County
Woodcarver



Off to school on horseback, sharing the saddle with his sister, humor was Gene Zesch's saving grace coming of age on his parents' hardscrabble ranch outside of Mason. By the time Gene turned 20, the Great Depression and World War II had come and gone, but ahead lay what would become the worst drought in Texas history.

Although he enjoyed drawing caricatures of his professors in college, becoming an artist was hardly a thought. That changed, however, when Gene and his new bride, Patsy, came across a woodcarver on the downtown square in Santa Fe. After studying the carver's work, something clicked: "I believe I can do that. I'd like to try carving."

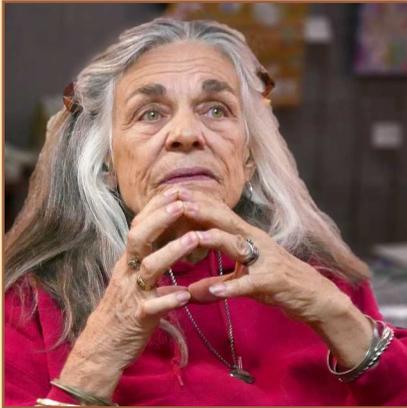
Whittling away with a pocket knife after a day wrangling cattle rings True Texas through and through, but making a living at it? As a fourth-



generation rancher, carving caricatures of down-and-out ranchers trying to hold their own was a perfect fit. After some sage advice from sculptor Charles Umlauf, Gene began to develop his own style using basswood and one razor-sharp knife. "It's sort of Scandinavian long cuts instead of little detail."

For those who had difficulty accepting Gene's work as art, the floodgates opened when President Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson became collectors. For a simple cowboy gifted with a dry wit and an eye for expression, his work has been exhibited throughout the nation, including at the Institute of Texan Cultures, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, where at the time it was the best attended solo art show in their 50-year history.

Roxanne Fargason
Junction | Kimble County
Portrait Painter



“One wrong stroke and you lose it. Sometimes it helps to turn the work upside down or work with a mirror.”

In grade school, Roxanne Fargason’s freehand pencil sketches were so exacting her schoolmates were convinced she traced them. Unlike her three sisters, who had very little interest in drawing, for Roxanne it just seemed to be her—a perfect fit.

A forerunner of the modern pencil was devised in the late 1700s. Artists quickly adopted it and by the 1800s pencil drawing was commonly used for studies and preliminary sketches.

“[Drawing] was what I could do and what interested me.” Encouragement was lacking, however, until years later when Roxanne began taking art classes in Junction. After a “miserable” attempt at watercolors, she tried her hand at acrylics, and later with charcoal and oils in an Old Masters Method workshop taught by Frank Covino.

Roxanne’s recent works include “The Good Man,” a tribute portrait of Isidro Esquivel,



a working cowboy in the area who died unexpectedly; and "Watchful," a portrait study of Hilario Cantú, formerly the county sheriff. "When facial images are smaller, it is so much easier to make mistakes-- one wrong stroke and you can lose it," Roxanne explains. "With all portraits, it often helps to turn the the work upside down or work with a mirror." When rendering her drawings with graphite, Roxanne often softens the work using bristle brushes of various sizes

After tending to her sheep, chickens, cats, dogs and two special peacocks...and catching up on the news of the day...by late afternoon Roxanne may well take a turn in her studio under the bright lights intent on a new art piece.

Gary Neisemier
Junction | Kimble County

Western Gear Maker & Repair

*“Business used to be done
on a handshake and the
majority of 'em today
are still the same way.”*



Ranch managers all—father, father-in-law, grandfather—the tradition runs deep in Gary Neisemier’s family. After Gary took his turn as a manager, and the ranch was sold off, it meant a new beginning in boot and saddle repair.

Now some 26 years later, still operating on a handshake, Gary continues to serve the “salt of the earth” folks in the area. “There’s less saddle work these days, but there are always gun belts and holsters.” With tongue in cheek, he adds, “It’s funny, the saddle business will fall off and the boot business seems to pick up, especially after a rain when they find holes in them.” Gary buys his leather from two suppliers. But times have changed; be it his Amish leather goods supplier or wool-skin vendor, wait times of up to four months are not unusual.

Vintage repair equipment, wrangled over two decades to fit a need, ring the shop table piled high with orders. Today’s project, relining a saddle, meant removing some of the saddle parts to get to the old wool lining. Once out with the old and in with the new, to ensure the same fit, the liner was hand stitched in place using the original stitch holes. Like a “punchy” cowboy who knows just what he’s doing, Gary continues to turn out quality work he stands behind, no questions asked. “The Good Book says, ‘As you sow, so shall you reap.’” As for the future, Gary’s 12 year old granddaughter, already into knots and braiding, might be interested in the business.

Grady Douglass Rocksprings | Edwards County

Leather Crafter



Grady Douglass stands tall, the fifth generation to work the family ranch in Edwards County. Living the Western lifestyle is something Grady has always been passionate about. A summer job during college helped galvanize his interest all the more. While "tuning" horses in the Texas Panhandle, Grady's eyes were opened to the value of the maker. "The handmade appreciation...in that ranch cowboy world, I think, [is] second to none. It's your working/using gear that you're actually making a living with."

After his return to school, from belts to knife sheaths, Grady focused on selling his own leatherwork. By the time of his graduation two years later, Grady had shipped product to 47 states out of his one bedroom apartment in College Station. Convinced that he could make a living at leather work he returned home to build a business. As a leather craftsman...without a storefront...relying on social media...Grady has stayed six to eight months out on custom orders for ten years while living



“You are selling that experience of a maker living on a ranch in Texas crafting exceptional high quality functional art that people can carry with them and enjoy.”



on a ranch outside of Rocksprings (pop. 1100). “Ninety-nine percent of the people I’ve made things for I’ve never met.”

But all this didn’t just happen; while still in college, realizing his need for a mentor, Grady sought out Wayne Decker in Round Rock, Texas, a retired leather crafter willing to share his knowledge. “The quality of my work jumped five years in that two months because of Wayne’s efforts and because I was committed.” At that point, Grady admits, what separated his work from Wayne’s work were miles of leather. “I just needed to do it.”

José Santos Gómez Del Rio | Val Verde County

Master Instructor La Catrina Tradition

“I love to teach what I know to do. I love to transfer to other people what I know. The arts, the painting, the crafts.”



For the past five years Maestro José Santos Gómez has taught the “Catrina” workshop at Del Rio’s La Casa de la Cultura. At the workshop, once students learn how to construct the basic figure, they are free to dress their Catrina as they wish using their imagination with brown craft paper, cardboard and glue.

Today’s La Catrina figures are an outgrowth of José Guadalupe Posada’s lithographs first published in the early 1900s, satirizing Mexico’s high-society obsession with European customs. Posada’s “calavera” or skull, wears a fanciful hat in the European style. Her name, ‘Catrina,’ comes from the slang ‘catrin’ which referred to a well-dressed man or woman. Posada’s artworks were a reminder for people to be themselves. And that no matter how rich or poor, the color of one’s skin, or what society one belongs to, we will all end up as skeletons.



Maestro Gómez was born in Ciudad Acuña. A consistent winner in student art competitions, he recalls, “[Art] was always inside of me. I was always looking [toward] the painters.” Later, while working at a *maquiladora* factory in Ciudad Acuña, Maestro Gómez was asked to lead a workshop on oil painting. “That’s how I started 30

years ago.” Fortuitously, a tradition keeper from the interior of Mexico came to Acuña to give a workshop on “Catrinas.” Maestro Gómez was enthralled. Today as a master instructor, he is bringing the tradition across the border. And now with his daughter attending the workshop, “I’m thinking, when I am not here in this world, she can go on.”

Myles Jakubowski
Del Rio | Val Verde County

Spinning Wheel Maker



In Del Rio, with its proud Mexican-American heritage, Myles Jakubowski stands out both in name, given his Polish heritage, and for his singular pursuit, building classic spinning wheels of absolute perfection.

From his great-grandfather in Gdansk, Poland, to his grandfather and father in Detroit—tool and die makers all—exacting precision was an absolute in their work. This imperative was imprinted on Myles early on and later reinforced time and again in his 30 year career as a design engineer.

Approaching retirement, however, Myles' life took a turn. On weekends he began driving to San Antonio to apprentice with master spinning wheel designer/maker William Wyatt. Commercial spinning wheels tend to shake, rattle and make noises. In contrast, a William Wyatt wheel makes no sound at all. To accomplish this, after researching 'old school' tricks used in the construction of wagon wheels, William came up

with a way to allow the wood in his spinning wheels to expand without losing the precision of the wheel.

Since William's passing, maintaining his maker tradition rests solely on Myles' shoulders. Applying the lessons learned during his apprenticeship, after four or five months of exacting work, a Myles Jakubowski hand-wrought spinning wheel is born. Fusing form and function, his wheel now comes into its own as a working piece of art; an "heirloom" piece, that is, in its own time to be passed down to future generations. As the work continues, though, so does William's presence. "Even though he is not around, he is around," Myles explains. "He's always over my shoulder when I'm working on a lathe or doing anything."

Isabelle & Leticia Ramos Del Rio | Val Verde County

Folk Crafters - La Catrina Tradition



As October approaches, Isabelle and Leticia Ramos begin to exchange ideas for the upcoming La Catrina workshop at Del Rio's Casa de la Cultura. Once underway, it will take the two of them up to three weeks to complete their Catrina, the iconic female skeletal figure synonymous with Mexico's annual Day of the Dead. As they flesh out their ideas, Maestro José Santos Gómez, the workshop instructor, will advise them on new techniques. Once they establish a shape they like, they then start adding the fine details. Last year, Isabelle and Leticia created an elaborate wedding scene with La Catrina and her beloved Catrin receiving their marriage vows from a skeletal Bishop. "We wanted to create the narrative that there is still love in the afterlife; that there are so many things that you can look forward to and accomplish in the afterlife."

Once the PVC armature for the figure has been pieced together, the costuming phase begins using layers of brown paper. The paper, adhered with glue, is torn rather than cut with scissors, eliminating any straight edges the eye might notice. Using highlighter pens for fingers is one trick of the trade. From the patterned train on the bride's wedding dress to the rose petals on the groom's lapel, "I think that it's the little details that bring everything together," Isabelle offers.

Since its inception five years ago, Del Rio's Casa de la Cultura's annual La Catrina workshop has been transformative, introducing the tradition to an ever widening circle of workshop students; and visitors, as well, when the Catrinas go on display.

***"This is what we celebrate;
not the burying, not the sadness,
we celebrate their life."***





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