

It's in the Bag

EUGENE ARTIST BRINGS VINTAGE CHARM TO LEATHER ACCESSORIES by Kendall Fields

Barbara Cooper sits behind her one-hundred-year-old Singer sewing machine, slowly rocking her foot back and forth on the grate-like pedal. A needle pulling yellow thread punctures soft black leather as Cooper moves the fabric in a circular motion to fashion a purse handle.

By the ease of her sewing and the straightness of each stitch, it's hard to believe she's only been working with leather for three months and that she taught herself how to make handbags.

Cooper started out making and selling canvas bags for her Etsy shop but decided she wanted to do something different. She switched to leather, finding its unique traditional look more akin to her taste.

Cooper is now reviving the dying art of sewing leather. Through research, improvisation and trial-and-error,

she started making bags that her friends — and their friends — wanted to buy. Now she has more requests than she can keep up with.

"The fact that I sell them is funny, because I just never thought of myself as a sewer," the Mississippi native says, adding that in junior high she was kicked out of home economics class for sewing her thumb one too many times.

Cooper says the biggest difference from working with canvas is that leather is completely unforgiving. "Once you cut it, once you sew it, you can't ever re-sew it," she says. "But maybe that's why I like it. It's a fun challenge that you can only sew it once."

This Eugene designer has always had a knack for art — painting, sketching, making jewelry and even sewing dresses for her daughter. (Cooper, a former *EW* employee who is married to art director Todd Cooper, illustrated *EW*'s May 26 Tarot cover.) "Art is my therapy," she says. "It's my stress relief."

Tucked in the back corner of her house just off River Road, Cooper's craft room has become a haven, with four sewing machines, a growing stock of leather, vintage designer bags, antique tools and ornate closures, studs and fixtures. She could spend hours in here — and she does, often working from early evening into the wee hours of the morning.

Cooper makes each bag (starting at \$150) to her customers' specifications, adding an easily accessible pocket for a plane ticket and passport in a traveler's bag, with perhaps a laptop slot for a tech-savvy fashionista or a gun holster for a take-no-shit woman.



DESIGNER BARBARA COOPER TAMES THE LEATHER

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA



She explains that she wants her bags to be functional and just as chic as those made by famous designers, but at a more affordable price.

It starts with a sketch. Then Cooper makes a pattern out of paper, cuts it out and sews it. Her inspiration comes from something as simple as the veins on a leaf in her backyard or as timeless as a vintage handbag.

"I like fixing things," Cooper says. "I think that gives my bags a unique quality."

Cooper's designs are sophisticated and simple, with playful pops of bright colors and whimsical leatherwork. And she knows the quality of the materials she uses for each bag is what makes the difference. She buys premium leathers from Oregon Leather — creamy purple lambskin, metallic greens and pinks with colored thread. She twists the leather into elegant swirls, hammering and molding it before hand-stitching it into its final place.

And Cooper likes to do things the old-fashioned way, using that antique sewing machine and even a hand-powered drill to really *make* a bag.

"I'm pretty clever when it comes to putting stuff together and in a way I don't feel like you can do with modern stuff," she says.

Cooper is still figuring out how to maximize her profit on each bag sold. She plans to expand her business by creating a website featuring her designs. She also hopes to get an industrial sewing machine and create a line of bags. She even wants to write a book to teach others about sewing leather.

As her foot continues to rhythmically push the pedal, Cooper pulls the needle and yellow thread through the black leather in a soft buzz. She maneuvers the scrap of stubborn fabric through the needle one last time — careful not to stitch her thumbs — and holds it up. "There, not bad, huh?" she says. "Just wait till you see it finished." ❖

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