

Art flourishing in the form of leather

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Artist Coye Balok creating art out of a pastime

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Gallup is a haven for artists of different genres and these artists possess talents that capture one's eye. Such is the case with artist Coye Balok, whose talent is taking leather and turning it into beautiful works, calling his artwork Kestrel Leather.

The 45-year-old Gallupian takes pieces of leather and sews them together to make purses, wallets, and other items. It's a part-time hobby that sometimes stretches into a full-time occupation. His journey began in August of 2018, when friend, Tressa Weidenarr, showed him pictures of items that others made with pieces of leather. Balok wanted to try his hand at it.

"My friend Tressa, who does knitting showed me the pictures and told me to give it a try," he said. "I wanted to make some stuff for myself, such as a better belt and wallet. From there it took off."

Once figuring out how to make a simple wallet, Balok began to experiment with other items. He started buying leather at City Electric in Gallup in different sizes, colors, and hides. It was a lot of trial and error Balok said. But he learned from his mistakes.

Balok makes his living at Cowboy Carwash (1845 S. Second St.) which he has owned for the past three years. But this side interest keeps him busy in his off hours.

"I remember the first time I made a lady's wallet. It came out pretty good," he said. "Since then I've learned to work on how the leather responds and using my sewing machine to make my products better. The better the stitching, the better the product.

"I called my leatherwork Kestrel Leather because, Kestrel is a falcon which is part of the hawk family. It's small, powerful, and I thought it was cool," he said.

Leather works that Balok makes include; big tote bags, purses, wallets, belts, keychains, book covers, valet trays.

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There really is no big production work to create these pieces. No prep work is needed. Balok says he simply buys the leather, cuts it, and pieces it together. His sewing machine uses a strong needle that can stitch through leather.

The hard part for Balok is coming up with the designs and styles.

“I remember my first craft sale at Bethany’s Church here in Gallup in 2018,” he said. “I did pretty good and made back what I purchased. People started requesting more items like my purses. My tote bags/purses are my most popular items, I do Pendleton designs, some are done with pockets and some are not, I’ve gotten very positive feedback.”

Balok says he’s been experimenting with different styles and techniques to better his leather art.

In the beginning he made some items that didn’t hold, so there’s always room for improvement. He’s learned how to stitch and use glue for some of his leather work, and the leather he uses comes in different colors such as, black, brown, tan, and even turquoise.

Since 2018, Balok has done four craft shows and you can view some of his work at Makeshift Gallery, 213 W. Coal Ave.

“One type of leather I like to work with is *hair on leather*, it gives it a different look and women really like this type of purse.”

Currently, Balok is preparing for Christmas and is working to fill orders. He says he likes making leather items. The work makes him happy and the items make his customers happy.

For more information contact him on Instagram @coyebalok.

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