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Artist Profile

Sean Connolly and the Unexpected Gift

Children at Christmastime are notorious for eyeing their siblings' gifts, but the sled that Sean Connolly swapped for his brother's leather art kit ended up making an unexpected imprint on his life. Like the leather he transforms into beautiful art, the act of creation itself has molded Connolly into an award-winning craftsman. With the supplies included in that first kit, he began creating small items like coasters and wallets. When the ten or so pieces of leather were used, he began special ordering more supplies and tools. His love for the work continued through high school as he taught himself the trade. Now 38, Connolly has found that entering his work in local competitions offers him little satisfaction though – his art wins time and again. Connolly feels that takes away the opportunity to recognize his fellow, less-experienced artists. Now, Connolly has taken his skills to the next level, national competition, and that seems to be a good fit.

"When I create a new piece of artwork, I feel like the art is hidden in the leather and it's my job as an artisan to uncover the concealed beauty," said Connolly, a Navy veteran from Olympia, Washington. "Even when I feel like I made a mistake, the flaw was always meant to be there long before I applied any tools to the leather."

Connolly likes to create one-of-a-kind pieces. Among his favorite leather creations are a wall hanging and some jewelry boxes. He shies away from belts and wallets because they don't offer him the challenge he seeks. For the national competition this year, he made a carry-on bag with a unique floral design, for which he earned first place in the leather carving and tooling category. The carry-on bag will be on exhibit during the 2008 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival in Riverside, California.

Leatherwork is not the only art media Connolly enjoys. By trade, he's an electrician, but when he's off the clock, he also likes to draw portraits. When he's tired of being cooped up inside, he ventures outdoors for some water sports like skiing and fishing. He'll be venturing a little further for adventure this October when he travels to California for the Creative Arts Festival, during which he won't mind being indoors. He's actually counting on being inside so he can enjoy all the other artwork on display and the activities of the event.

"It's just the excitement of the event," Connolly said, describing what he's looking forward to the most. "Going to California and to the Festival for the first time, seeing other veterans and their art—I couldn't ask for a better vacation."