

The Craft and Art of GARY BIRCH

Photography by Mike Caporale

Gary Birch is a self-taught artist whose works appear in private and museum collections around the country. Leaving a PhD. program in physiological psychology in 1969, Gary began making things with his hands "to work on ideas that had been neglected too long." Consequently, he has created scores of one-of-a-kind art objects in a variety of media.

He began by making and selling leather clothing in the early '70s and graduated to hunting pouches when he discovered the sport of black powder shooting. Soon he was making engraved powder horns, knives and measures, i.e., the accessories necessary for the complete shooting bag.

His interest in folk, primitive and twentieth century art prodded him to further exploration. Says Birch, "The folk art on American powder horns is some of the best anywhere. The best of it is very strong and universally appealing. Beyond its historical import, it is important American art."

The horn engraving led to an interest in American primitive art in general and in the late '70s Birch began painting.

"I painted between making pouches and horns," comments Birch. "I found a whole world in there that I'm only now getting time to devote myself to."

Birch's most recent work, which he started only this year, utilizes his knowledge of natural materials gained from pouch and horn making and the imagery from horn engraving and painting. "I'm making dolls," he says. "Some folks are uncomfortable with that word and prefer to call them sculpture. I call them figures. I like doing these. There's freedom here and yet the work is still traditional in the sense that the materials are and the imagery is universal and simple."

His ideas for figures coalesced about five years ago when he realized that all the materials from pouches could be used

in an art form.

"Five years later I started my first one. I wish the hands worked as fast as the mind," he expresses. "Now I'm on my eighth one and they are occupying all my time. I hope to return to painting part-time because I miss the color."

Gary has a penchant about how age and use affects materials. This fact is demonstrated in all his works, whether two dimensional or three dimensional. He reflects, "I like what time does to things... the marks it leaves on surfaces, the transparency, the life it gives to an otherwise unremarkable object. That evidence of human use makes a thing more like those who use it."

Regardless of the medium, Gary Birch has the ability to take natural materials and turn them into warm, esthetic works of American art. On these and the following pages are showcased the talents of this unique American artist.





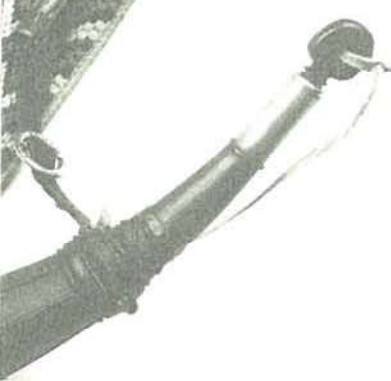
Left:

Hunting pouch and accessories.

Cowhide and deerskin pouch hangs from a needlepoint strap in black, green, orange and white wool by Mildred Birch. The engraved horn is embellished with silver and moose antler and is fitted with turned butt plug of cherry burl.

The knife is handled in deer antler with steel bolsters and pommel. The rawhide sheath is an integral part of the bag. Hickory-hafted ax with bark-tanned cowhide sheath. Notice how the bag strap and keeper secure the ax when sheathed. Brush by Wilson James. Copper measure by Karl Kuehn with engraving by Lew Sanchez.

(Scott Ellis collection)



Right:

Engraved cowhorn rum bottle with white oak plugs.

(Mike Caporale collection)



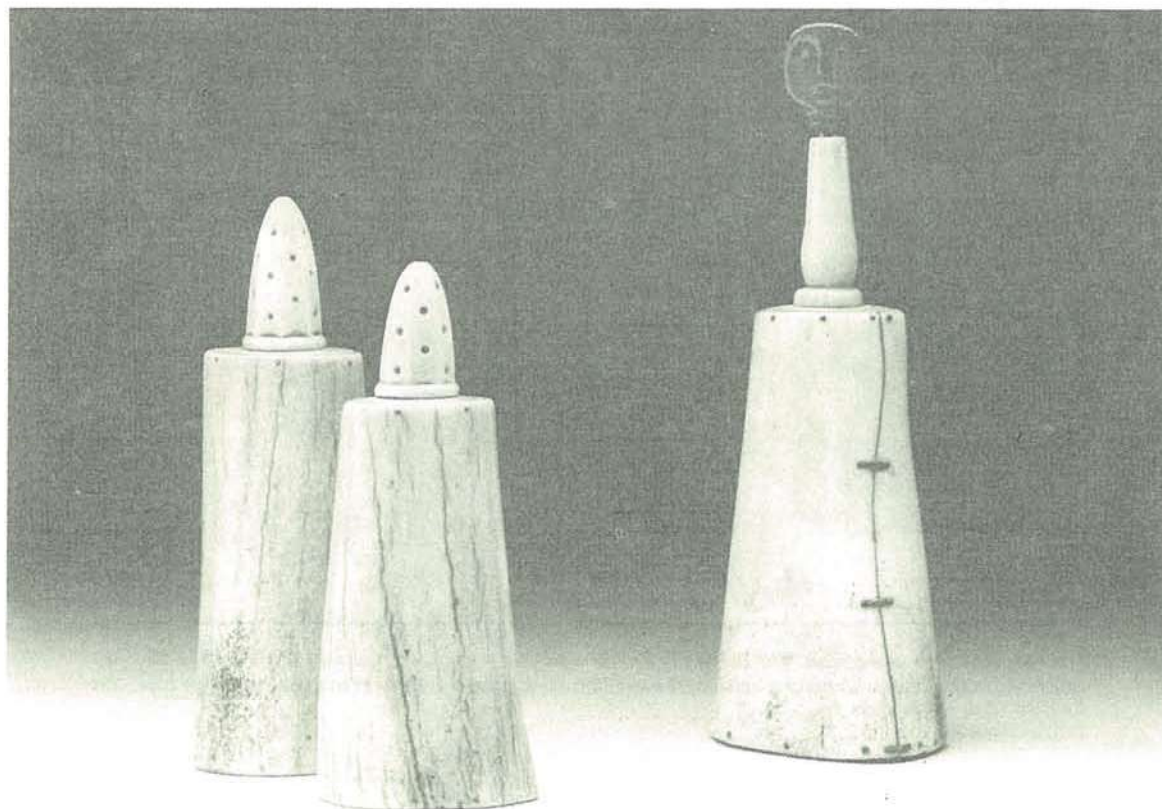
Containers in bone and antler.

Left: Salt and pepper shakers of elk antler, moose palm, deer antler, oak burl.

(Sally Davenport collection)

Right: Priming flask of beef bone, moose palm, deer antler, cherry burl.

(Robert Piper collection)





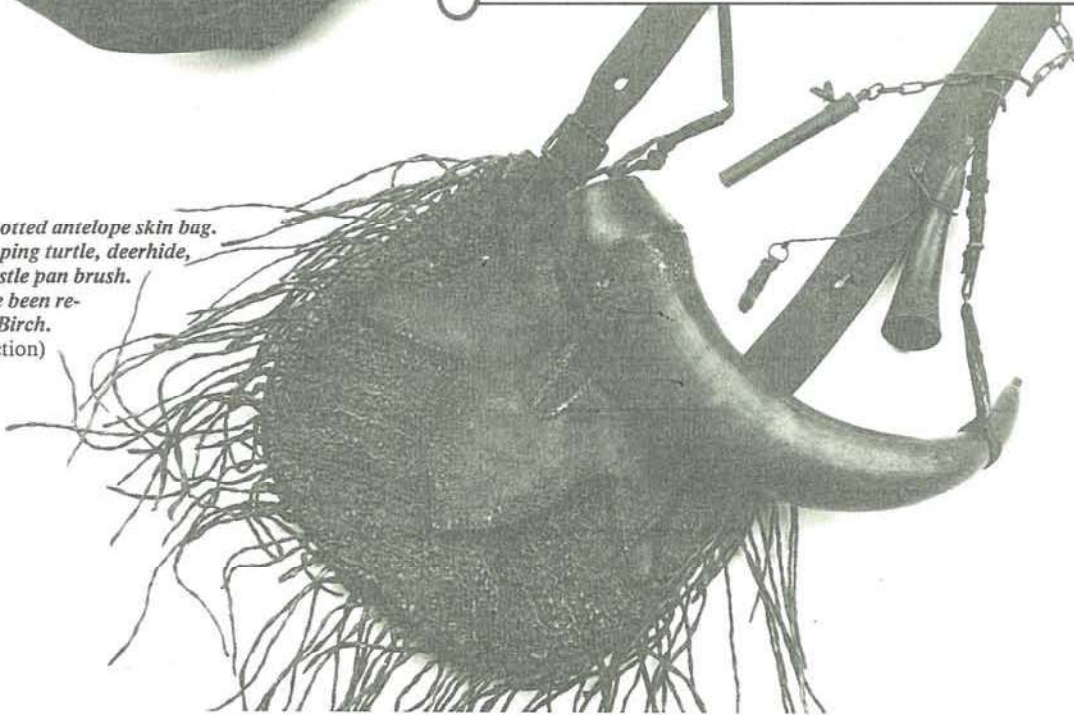
Clothing in leather and cotton. The burgundy leather waistcoat with pewter buttons is trimmed in blue polished cotton and lined with natural cotton. The pouch is alum-tanned sheepskin trimmed with deer hide. The knotted game bag is linen.
(Mike Caporale collection)

*Below: Large German game bag.
Cowhide, deerskin and dew claws.
(Bill Young collection)*

Far right: Back of German game bag showing integral sheath. The sheath is formed of wet rawhide which is lined with cowhide. The cowhide liner is sewn to the back of the pouch and the sheath is then sandwiched between the pouch back and the pouch lining.



*Hunting pouch with knotted antelope skin bag.
Made of cowhide, snapping turtle, deerhide,
tinplate and natural bristle pan brush.
The original horns have been re-
stored and repaired by Birch.
(Woody Schuster collection)*





*Above: Male figure.
Made of red oak burl, cow horn, steel, bark-tanned deerskin, cotton and linen.
This is the second in a series of figures which represent Birch's most recent work. The body is built over a wire armature and stuffed with sawdust in the manner of early dolls. Currently working on his eighth figure which has a steel face and hand-forged arms and legs, Birch's plans for future pieces include larger figures and figures with animals, turtles, frogs, dogs and crows.
(Susan Ellis collection)*

*Right: Figure (Detail)
Oak burl head, cowhorn eyes with steel pupils and leather lids, leather ears, cotton cap, leather body.
(Marge and Robert Piper collection)*



*Above: LEWIS WETZEL.
Oil on ticking. Known as "Deathwind" to the Indians because of his indiscriminate and effective killing tactics, Lewis Wetzel roamed the West Virginia-Ohio border area between 1777-1800. Birch's painting style reflects the primitive/naive style prevalent during the eighteenth century.
(Jon Anspaugh collection)*

