



MATTHEW GASTON | THE SHERIDAN PRESS

The Brinton Museum is currently exhibiting the “Master Leather Carving from North America and Japan: Design and Cultural Influences” show in the third floor gallery.

# ‘Dreaming of the old cowboys’

## New Brinton show celebrates cross-cultural connection between leatherworkers

BY STEPHEN DOW  
STEPHEN.DOW@THESHERIDANPRESS.COM

SHERIDAN — There may not be many similarities between Masuda, Japan, and Sheridan, Wyoming, but if Sheridanites walked into Lefty Mikuni’s Masuda leatherworking shop, they would feel right at home.

“As I grew up admiring cowboys because of the westerns I saw when I was little, I also became interested in cowboy’s culture and fashion,” Mikuni said. “I was particularly interested in their belongings and accessories. And I wanted to make something like that. ... Their leather goods were (what) I wanted to make the most. And as I ordered and studied various materials, I began to interpret cowboy crafts as a wonderful thing that was practical but also well-used as an art work. ... I try and test (my skills) every day while dreaming of the old cowboy(s) who made it by themselves from the tools.”

Mikuni is just one of the Japanese leather artisans who have taken the Sheridan style of leather carving to heart in the years after World War II, Sheridan County leather artisan Jim Jackson said.

“During World War II, there were a lot of GIs over there, and the kids got a taste of American cowboy culture: John Wayne movies and stuff like that,” Jackson said. “Here in Sheridan, leather carving has always been a part of our culture, but in Japan it slowly became a part of their culture as they fell in love with the West.”

The influence of western

leatherworking in Japan — and vice versa — is the subject of a new show at the Brinton Museum: “Master Leather Carving from North America and Japan: Design and Cultural Influences.”

The show, curated by Jackson, features pieces from 10 North American artists and 15 from Japan.

“What I wanted to do with the show is talk about the cultural exchange of ideas between our countries,” Jackson said. “It’s a beautiful thing when people across the world willingly share ideas with each other and learn from each other. ... Sheridan leather carvers having an influence on the Japanese is an amazing story, and now the Japanese work is starting to influence what is being done here. I think that’s just wonderful.”

The show features pieces created in many different carving styles, with an emphasis on what is known around the world as Sheridan style, Jackson said. Sheridan style carving is a hybrid of two earlier carving styles: Visalia and Porter.

“The Porter style is known for its larger flowers, while the Visalia style is usually more ornate,” Jackson said. “Sheridan style incorporates all those elements, but circles and curls are more dominant in the Sheridan style, and there is a certain dynamic in the Sheridan style you don’t get out of the other two styles that influenced it.”

Sheridan style was pioneered by local leather artisan Don King, Jackson said. King’s son William and grandson Barry both have pieces in The Brinton’s



The Brinton Museum’s “Master Leather Carving from North America and Japan: Design and Cultural Influences” show features traditional leather items like saddles and guitar cases alongside more unique items like this vase by Michiko Matsuda.

exhibition.

“I’ve been around leatherwork all my life and probably learned most of it through osmosis,” William King said. “Since I don’t consider myself a professional leatherworker anymore, it is more of a therapy and cold weather time-killer for me. It’s still nice doing something for somebody that appreciates it.”

Jackson has traveled to Japan on multiple occasions and said you could walk into almost any leather shop in the country and the local artisans would know about Sheridan style and Don King.

However, Japanese leather carver Taka Otsuka, whose work is featured in

the Brinton show, says it is ironic the Sheridan style of leather carving is now considered by the younger generation of Japanese carvers to be “less contemporary” than the Visalia and Porter styles, which were actually developed years earlier. Even older styles can provide new inspiration when seen with fresh eyes, Otsuka said.

“At first I was worried that I could not express myself with an original work and that I could only imitate things which had already reached their completion,” Otsuka said. “But now I come to think it’s my self-expression to pay deep gratitude and respect to my predecessor, to inherit tradition and to refine it more attractively without significantly changing it. I am proud to be a traditionalist and want to pass on the traditions cultivated by our predecessors to the next generation.”

“Master Leather Carving from North America and Japan: Design and Cultural Influences” is on display at The Brinton through Sept. 5.

**MEMORIAL DAY MONDAY, MAY 30<sup>TH</sup>**

The City of Sheridan Landfill, Recycling Center and City Hall will be closed in observance of Memorial Day.

★ REGULAR HOURS RESUME TUESDAY, MAY 31<sup>ST</sup>

For Landfill and Recycling information, visit [sheridanwy.gov](http://sheridanwy.gov) or call 307.674.8461 (option #2)

**NO TRASH & RECYCLING COLLECTION ON MONDAY.**

If your collection day lands on the holiday, put your cans out by 6am the following day.

Collections will continue as usual Tuesday, May 31<sup>st</sup>.