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american
— SON —

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ON A TYPICALLY BEAUTIFUL SATURDAY MORNING IN SANTA BARBARA,

I make my way down a narrow alley to 117 W. De La Guerra St., to meet third generation leather-smith Steven D. Soria. Today, my husband is in tow as we arrive at the tiny, tucked away space where Steven works. It's a first, having Christian with me during an interview, but Steven is a gracious host, and invites us both inside to chat. From the very beginning, he is easygoing and forthcoming, as he fields eager questions from the two of us. He tells the story of how his hereditary passion for leather working led to Make Smith Leather Company, and his carving out a place for himself in the growing craft movement.

Leather working runs deep within Steven's lineage. Members of the Soria family were once well-known for their skill in saddlery work. Some have even contributed art that lives on in history; two large leather saddles his great uncle hand-tooled as rodeo trophies are on exhibit in a historical museum, and Steven brings our attention his display of a time-worn photo of the embellished prizes. The incredible detail is evident, even in sepia and under the glass of a shadow box. Steven's parents fell in love, got married after high school, and took the family business over from his paternal grandfather, moving the bulk of their work out of saddlery and into general leather repair services, as many of the local ranchers moved away from Santa Barbara. He spent his childhood days in the family shop, just half a block away from where we stand today, and he grew up learning leather craftsmanship by observing his parents, before eventually working together with them side-by-side.

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But by the time high school was over, he knew he didn't want to follow in his parents' footsteps. He just wasn't interested in restoration. He wanted to make new things.

Describing himself as "art-driven," Steven had his parents' encouragement as he headed for L.A. to pursue his BFA in fine arts, with a concentration in sculpture. What he learned in college provided a skill set for the work he does now, but he was turned off by the art world. He wasn't satisfied making things that didn't seem to be adding tangible value to the world. "I found that craft had a bigger impact on a daily basis. For example, if you bought a tote bag: I know there's a direct function that you're getting – you're making use of the thing that I made, and I like that; the connection isn't wasteful. Whereas the pieces I was making as a sculptor would go in some rich person's collection in Los Angeles, and I never saw them again. I was more interested in trying to make things for people I cared about."

Steven says art and L.A. broke his heart, and, disillusioned, he headed back home to his roots, to spend some time working closely with his parents again, this time manufacturing goods in his own shop within their shop. After a time, he found himself refreshed by the familiar creative process, and struck out on his own. With an art before money mindset, he sold his vintage Chevy Malibu and used the \$12,000 to rent out a tiny space in Goleta, and started what he hoped would be a craft school. He worked part-time in web-development to pay the bills so he could introduce others to the leather craft, instead of trying to make money directly off of what he was creating, determined to avoid another disappointment. "I used to only want to teach. I didn't want to become a capitalist; I didn't want to have to hustle every day – I already did that."

But reality checked him, and it wasn't long before he came to terms with the fact that teaching and creating custom work for individual clients as a supplement wasn't a sustainable business model. His compact workshop limited the number of students he could host at any one time, and the pool of people who recognized (and were willing to pay for) the time it took to create custom pieces was just as small. He needed to figure out

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a way to feel proud of what he was giving to the world, and also accomplished as an entrepreneur. In 2012, he settled on design and production, and introduced the world to his talent and business acumen as Make Smith, making high-quality leather accessories and satisfying his urge to teach others the process by keeping his classes small and seasonal.

The inspiration for Make Smith's design aesthetic comes from a combination of a patrilineal family tradition, rooted deeply in the Santa Barbara County coast, as well as Steven's attraction to minimalist design and drive to create a distinct brand using American-bred cow hides and Earth-friendly practices.

The elements that influence his style are numerous: the northern European leather working style of the 1960s and 70s, the cultural essence of the Spaniards that still resonates in

Santa Barbara today, and a love of motorcycle style, along with his reverence for the saddlery work of his kin, his parents' commitment to ethical and humane practices, and the unavoidable "redneck" hippy vibe of his childhood memories. His work is both timeless and trendy, created by a man of the 21st century for whom the slow and deliberate process of stitching belts, wallets, and totes on an ancient analog-motor sewing machine, passed down through the gener-

ations, is a meditation practice. His muse may be difficult to define, but she belongs to him. "I think it's important as an artist to develop your own

voice. You can take inspiration, but you've really got to mix it up enough to create your own aesthetic."

Steven's current location isn't much bigger than his first was. Doubling as both a workshop and showroom, it's just in the neighborhood of 500 square feet. But the move opened him up to a vast and growing marketplace, and has helped Steven take the Make Smith brand to new heights. He's collaborated on special projects with local businesses like Shelter Social Club's Alamo Motel, and joined forces with major labels like Ugg Men's Wear. For a small company, run by one man and his part-time employee, these brushes with destiny have meant everything for the growth of his business, and Steven has learned many lessons while facing the challenges of stepping up to the plate as an artist and as a businessman.

Steven warns that although motivational speakers laud making

your passion your profession as the ultimate goal, it's a risky road to take, and it can be hard to keep finding your flow. The motivational books don't divulge the truth of how the business end of things can end up a wet blanket that smothers the fire if you let it. He describes life as a businessperson like a roller coaster ride that sometimes feels like a perpetual climb to the top. Even still, he feels like the risk has been worth it. "Even if only ten percent of my time is creative work, and the other ninety percent is just really hard work, I'm grateful for that ten percent, because [before Make Smith] I never had a job where I had even ten percent. That ten percent, when we're talking about flow, is so rewarding." Tiny fractions of time spent inspired and deeply, emotionally invested in creating something that he can be proud of provides the momentum required to power through his less thrilling obligations.

He's proud of his work – and rightly so. "These things are designed for people," Steven says, and not long before Christian and I depart, a couple shoves open the heavy metal sliding door at the entrance and steps inside, the lady in the party ready to shop. We listen to her coo and comment as she browses the merchandise, and in less than five and a half minutes (I have the time-stamped recording to prove it!), she has made her choice and directed her husband to pull out his credit card and sign. They exit the building together; Steven's happy customer with a brand new tote bag and a smile that wasn't on her face when she came in. She loves how the bag lays flat and close to her body, that the strap isn't too long, and that the inside pocket isn't too big. I wouldn't be surprised if I learned she'd started unpacking her old purse before they were back to the car.

Steven has refined the process. He's confident that he understands what people want, and contented in the fact that sometimes his work is what someone has been searching for, and sometimes, it's the perfect something they didn't know they were searching for at all. He's also contented to know now what he didn't when he left home at 17 looking to find himself: that the path would lead back to where it all started, and he'd find something he had all the time. This work is just what he needed. "I really get a lot out of that. It's really special for me to see. You know that lady's going to have that [bag] for the rest of her life. She's happy, and that's it. It's love at first sight." 🧵

Not in downtown Santa Barbara today? Find Make Smith online at www.makesmith.com

