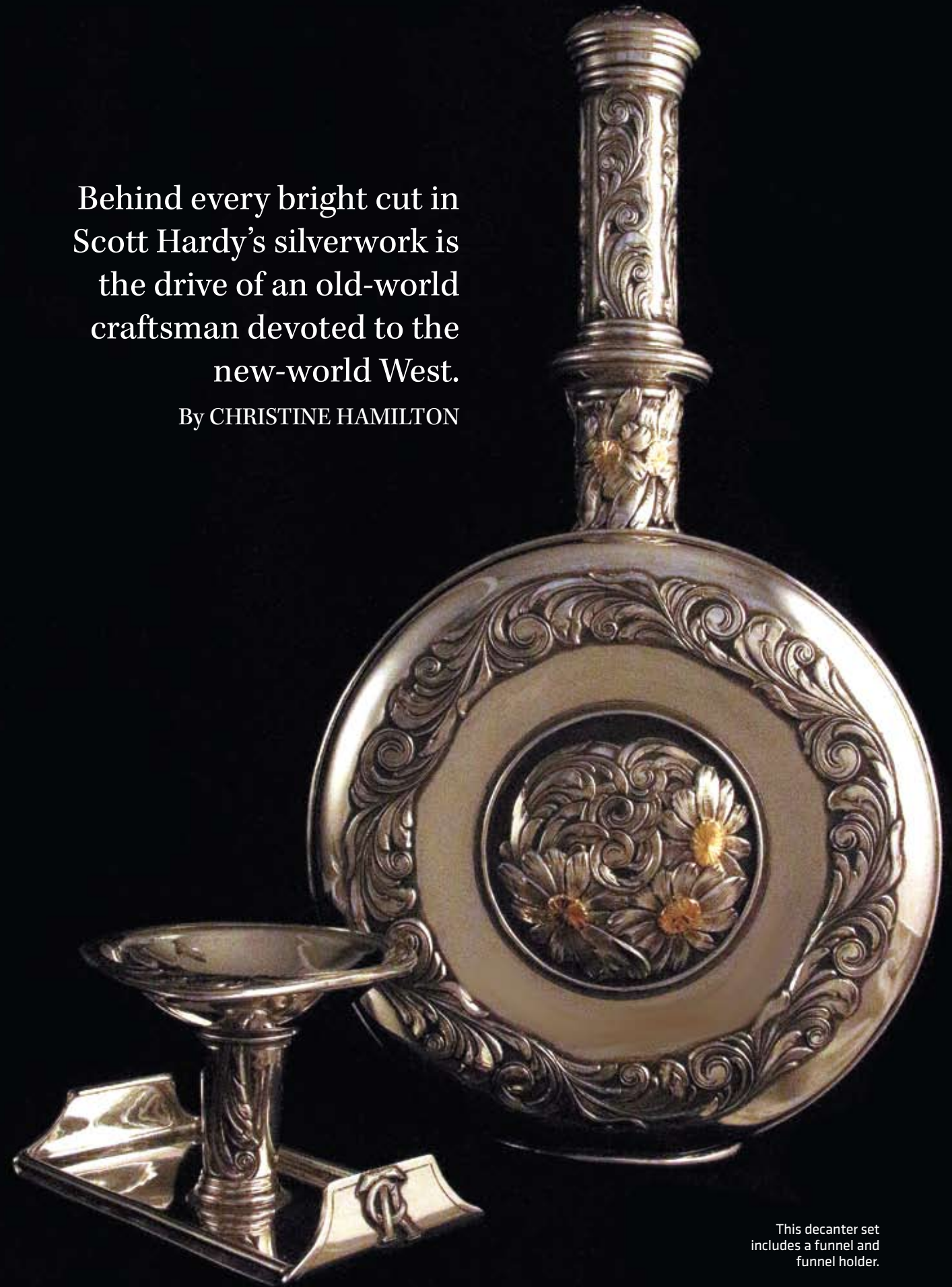


# Stories in the Silver

Scott Hardy engraves in his home studio in Longview, Alberta. Fellow TCAA member and saddlemaker Chuck Stormes helped him build his workbenches.

Behind every bright cut in Scott Hardy's silverwork is the drive of an old-world craftsman devoted to the new-world West.

By CHRISTINE HAMILTON



LESLIE HARDY

This decanter set includes a funnel and funnel holder.





A silversmith for 36 years, Scott Hardy is a founding member of the 20-year-old Traditional Cowboy Arts Association.

ONE OF SCOTT HARDY'S FAVORITE STORIES to tell is at his own expense. It was 1985, and Hardy was craving all of the education he could find to further his engraving skills. He'd been scraping together a living as a full-time silversmith for four years.

He and his wife, Leslie, borrowed just enough money to send Hardy from their home in southern Alberta, Canada, to eastern Washington State for three days of mentoring from silversmith Mark Drain. Time with a respected Western bright-cut engraver was priceless to Hardy, who was mostly self-taught.

"We were having coffee, and Mark's talking about engraving, and I said, 'Well, I use a [power engraving] machine. It's way faster than by hand.' Mark didn't say anything.

"We went out to his shop and he said, 'What would you like to see me do?' I said, 'I'd like to see you bright cut.' He chuckled a piece of silver down there and he just attacked it. I mean there were chips flying everywhere. He stopped and looked at me and said, 'Faster than that?'"

Hardy still chuckles at the lesson.

"When I came home I put that machine away, and for the next 30 years I engraved by hand," he says.

The engraver ball vise that Hardy uses today was bought from Drain on that trip.

"It's old school, and a hard way to engrave," he adds, pointing to the scars on his hands. "But it's the only way to learn it."

The lesson set him on a lifelong path of challenging and honing his skills and art. Hardy's work in silver and other precious metals consistently sits at the height of his craft. His buckles, jewelry, flasks and saddle trappings are found all over the Western world, enjoyed and worn by ranchers, cowboys, and performers such as Ian Tyson and Dwight Yoakam. The only Catholic communion goblet Hardy has made now resides with a priest in the Vatican. In 2005 he was commissioned to make buckles for all of Canada's provincial and

territorial premiers, and in 2012 the Calgary Stampede asked him to create commemorative buckles to celebrate its centennial.

Hardy's honors include receiving the 2001 Will Rogers Award for Engraver of the Year from the Academy of Western Artists. He helped to found the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association in 1998, and he has participated each year in the artisan group's annual show and sale, Cowboy Crossings, at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Not bad for a fifth-generation stockman from Saskatchewan.

Raised horseback and cowboying, Hardy worked as a packing guide in Canada's Banff National Park, shod horses and worked on oil rigs, always hoping to someday have land and cattle of his own. After Leslie pointed out a newspaper ad for a night course on silverwork at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Hardy signed on for 10 weeks and then began selling his work to pay for his dream.

"Somewhere along the way, the plan changed," Hardy says. "The more I got into [silverwork], the more I enjoyed it."

His studio in Longview, Alberta, points to that life. Brightly lit by high windows, the studio was built by Hardy in 2011



behind his and Leslie's home and barn. His old friend and fellow TCAA founder, saddlemaker Chuck Stormes, helped him design and build custom workbenches perfect for engraving and fabrication.

In addition to engravers' tools, vises and lamps, the workspaces have stacks of art books and sketchpads filled with scrolls and flower drawings. A print of Edward Borein's *I-See-U*—the Calgary Stampede's iconic bronc—is equally at home there with a well-thumbed book showcasing Tiffany & Co.'s silver masterpieces.

Hardy is there most days of the week, unless a friend says "let's go chase cows." And it's the best place to see what drives this cowboy's amazing work.

**BUCKLES WERE AMONG** the first things Hardy made. In 1981, he could make one buckle a day and sell each for \$100. He would work at night to fill orders, then sleep on his bench and be up early, at it again.

A conversation one morning with a man who made production trophy buckles brought him to a crucial decision.

"He said, 'I've got to build 250 buckles this weekend,'" Hardy recalls. "I said, 'If you don't mind me asking, what do you get apiece for those buckles?' 'Oh, \$85. I went home that night, and it wouldn't leave me alone.'"

Production work was tempting. He'd often worked winters in his stepfather's machine shop, and his stepfather had

**ABOVE:** The buckle appeared at the 2017 Cowboy Crossings, with a leather belt carved by TCAA saddlemaker John Willemsma.

**RIGHT:** Hardy "stages" this silver buckle before he solders pieces in place.



even offered to set him up for it. But he couldn't imagine making a living running a machine.

"I had to make a decision to be a production maker and go after it, or to be as good as I could get and be a custom maker," Hardy says.

The drive to better his work only increased when he and Leslie's twin sons, Tyne and Colter, were born in 1984. Yet, as far as his custom work has taken him through the years in the variety and scale of objects he's fashioned in silver and gold, buckles have never left his workbench.

"The buckle is my favorite thing in the whole world," he says. "It's a cowboy's touchstone—it's a statement of who you are. It's the most personal thing I can create for somebody. That's why I enjoy doing a brand buckle, because to a lot of

guys, that brand says more about who they are than their initials or anything else."

Always paying attention to personal details, it made Hardy's day when Alberta rancher and past Stampede president Dave Sibbald noticed his family's Triple S brand engraved on the bucking horse in his president's buckle.

"I build them so that every time they look at them, they can find something different," he says. "There's nothing worse than boring work."

Which is another reason why he loves buckles: They pose an artistic challenge to take a common form and continue to make it unique.

"Composition enthralls me," he says. "I study a lot of different art, why something works and something doesn't."





**ABOVE:** Hardy's six shot glasses came on an ebony serving tray built by John Morel, with handles and feet that Hardy also fabricated. **RIGHT:** Hardy fashioned a set of solid silver and gold shot glasses as part of his work for the 2017 Cowboy Crossings.

Take the woman's buckle he built for the 2017 TCAA show. Hardy's arrangement of layered silver flowers that spill over the buckle's edge, with scrolls naturally drawing the eye upward, becomes a "big and bold statement seen from across the room." Hardy wants to create Western buckles that are equally at home at a ballet in New York City as they are at the cattlemen's dinner in Calgary.

He personally prefers a three-piece set, a traditional ranch buckle.

"As a kid, I just admired buckles when I saw someone with one. We always got store-bought stuff, and I couldn't wait to win a good one," he says. "I never did win one, so I built one."

**THE STORY OF THE WEST**—its history, traditions and culture—is what Hardy wants to tell with every piece he creates.

"The first outfit I worked for in Banff, if you came down to the barn and your shirt wasn't pressed, you got sent home to get a clean shirt and a shave and come back," Hardy says as an example. "To me, that's the West. You put your best foot forward, whatever that is."

He sees it in his great-grandmother's silver tea set; she brought it with her from

England to their homestead in Saskatchewan. Hardy's grandmother used to pull it out of the china cabinet so he could admire it.

"It was a time where the elegance of something like that gave you comfort," Hardy says. "It had been in her family. They came and had nothing, but brought one fine thing with them. And it gave them so much comfort at the end of the day, or when they sold their best bull and had something to celebrate.

"I've been in very few places [in the North American West] where I didn't run into something like that," he adds. "The West was rough, but there was an elegance they fought for. It wasn't about what you were entitled to; it was what you earned."

That best foot forward and hard-won elegance is behind the shot glass set and tray Hardy made for the 2017 TCAA show—something special with which to share a drink with a friend, and spend time in the enjoyment.

"It's a bygone era I'm trying to drag into the future," Hardy says.

Early in his vocation, Hardy's grandmother gave him *Tiffany's 150 Years* by John Loring, published in 1987, and he "about wore that book out" studying the



craftsmen's skills he could aspire to in sculpting, shading, carving and engraving objects from silver.

"I still go through it for inspiration," he says, cradling one of the gold-lined shot glasses in his hand. "It comes from an era where, in art and craftsmanship, there was no difference. It took one to achieve the other. That's what appeals to me."

He adds something he learned from esteemed Reno, Nevada, craftsmen Al Pecetti, a silversmith, and Al Tietjen, a bit- and spurmaker, in a conversation with them decades ago.

"They told me that if you decide to be in these [cowboy] trades," Hardy says, "you should give them the respect of taking them as far as you can take them."

**THERE'S A DEMEANOR COMMON** to all TCAA members, Hardy included, that makes them easy to spot in the galleries of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum during Cowboy Crossings, even though the crowd is full of cowboy hats.

They stand with straight, squared shoulders, and look like they don't know what to do with their hands, which might be in their pockets or hanging at their sides. Their hands are used to movement—handling horses, ropes and cattle, or in their arts, silversmithing, saddlemaking, rawhide braiding or bit- and spurmaking—and there is none of that here.

But just ask about a piece on display, whether it's a fully carved Visalia-style saddle or a 14-plait braided breast collar, and the hands jump to work to help tell the tale of its making in a cut, a sketch, or inspiration found in a friend's heading horse.

In Hardy's case, it was the shape of a bottle of fine sipping tequila that inspired the decanter he crafted for this year's show. He estimates it took him more than 400 hours, from fabrication through soldering and engraving, to complete the decanter and its small funnel and funnel holder.



The shape of the decanter Hardy built for the 2018 Cowboy Crossings was inspired by a glass bottle of fine tequila.



Hardy sketches a drawing on silver mounted on his engraver's ball, ready for bright-cut engraving. "If you can't draw it, you can't effectively cut it," he says.

## THE BRIGHT CUT

**Bright-cut engraving** is the hallmark of the Western silversmith, Hardy says. In bright-cut engraving, one cut is actually three. The first cut comes toward the engraver; the second follows the first and goes away from the engraver; and the third is a tiny "cap cut" right on the edge of the first two.

"You are literally forming a trough in the silver," Hardy explains, "so no matter which way the light hits it, it reflects. And you do that with every cut."

Bright-cut silverwork is bright and shiny when first cut. As the piece ages, the silver darkens in the troughs of the cuts. When it's polished "it'll get more life to it," Hardy says, and you'll see "more and more detail in the engraving."

It's also why Western silversmiths need a rotating engraver ball vise. The engraver swivels the vise holding the metal as each cut is made.

"The old engraver's balls you used to see in England and in Europe, they didn't spin like the ones we use," Hardy says. "They were round and would sit on a post; they gripped the material and the guys would walk around them tapping with their hammers.

"Because there's so much movement in our style of [bright-cut] engraving, you can't do that. You've got to have [an engraver ball] that moves as you make your cut."





*"I want my work to portray the West. And I want guys to look at it and go, 'Damn, that's cool,' no matter where they are in the world."*

Hardy often rides his gelding, Elvis, to help friends check cattle or with branding.

"For a guy who's been silversmithing five to seven days a week for 37 years, it took everything I had to create it," Hardy says. "The spinning, forming and rolling the metal. And I had to figure out all kinds of different techniques to solder it. There were days I paced the floor before I walked over to the soldering bench.

"Every time you do stuff like this, you learn a little more and push yourself a little harder."

For Hardy, that's the reason why the TCAA was formed, and why its sale—now in its 20th year—is important. It goads craftsmen to try new things and gives them a vehicle and an incentive to do so.

"The majority of your career is your bread-and-butter work, and that's good," Hardy says. "But the TCAA sale pushes me every year to do something different, and that helps all of my work.

"Between all the members in all the trades over the last 20 years, there are over 600 one-of-a-kind items that would not exist without that sale—items that celebrate and preserve the cowboy culture of the West."

Well aware of the struggles of beginning artisans, Hardy is especially supportive of TCAA's efforts to provide educational clinics and scholarships for emerging craftsmen and -women. That desire to share expertise also underlies an established tradition of members collaborating on pieces for the show.

For example, Hardy and longtime saddlemaker Cary Schwarz have collaborated on items every year.

"And I truly believe [the TCAA] has helped the [cowboy gear] industry by showing young guys where they can go," Hardy says.

The annual show and sale is a rare vacation for him and Leslie, married now for 40 years. The trip to Oklahoma City is a chance to visit old friends and celebrate another year's hard work.

"I picked this profession. It's like horsemanship or cattle—you're never done," Hardy says. "You never finish learning. It's a challenge. But it's only a challenge if you make it one.

"It does get harder, but it gets more interesting because you understand more. Now, instead of the challenge being, 'Can I do it?' the challenge becomes, 'What if I do this?'"

"There are people out there who hit a big meadow with nice grass and they just want to stay there. But to me, that's boring. I always want to swing the far gate open and go on."

Hardy doesn't think he'll ever retire. In recent years he has returned to using a power engraver because it eases his neck and shoulders, and his hands already know the finesse that hand engraving teaches. But his goals remain the same.

"I want to look back every year and see that my work has changed. That it's progressing," he says. "I want my work to portray the West. And I want guys to look at it and go, 'Damn, that's cool,' no matter where they are in the world.

"And I can say, 'Yep, that's from the West. This is Western silversmithing.'" 🍷

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## TCAA

**The Traditional Cowboy Arts Association**, formed in 1998, is a group of cowboy craftsmen/artists focused on five traditional cowboy arts: bit- and spurmaking, rawhide braiding, saddlemaking and silversmithing. The group provides educational clinics and scholarships to emerging artists in those trades. For more information, visit [tcowboyarts.org](http://tcowboyarts.org).

Annually, the TCAA joins with the painters and sculptors of the Cowboy Artists of America to hold Cowboy Crossings, a show and sale of their members' work, at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

This year's Cowboy Crossings will take place October 4-6. Get more information at [nationalcowboymuseum.org](http://nationalcowboymuseum.org).