



A Leathermans Tale

Mike Guli shares his love of painting, leather and history

By Heather A. Haines



“When someone asks me how long it takes to make something, I tell them forty years!” Mike Guli laughs.

Guli is the owner and driving force behind River Crossing, Inc., a company that creates custom leather clothing. That’s the simple explanation. The reality is a bit more colorful.

Born in upstate New York and growing up in a different version of the Long Island we know today, Guli knew from a young age he would be artist. In fact, when it came time to choose a college, he applied to just one: New York City’s School of Visual Arts. He then spent the following years being classically trained as a painter, the Director of Art at The Ruth S. Harley University Center at Adelphi University and finally becoming an Art Therapist at a drug rehab program.

“Working as an Art Therapist was difficult. The system was broken then and it’s still broken today. After eighteen months, I decided I never wanted to work for anyone else again. So, we moved to Colorado where the cowboy culture I’d always loved was such a part of daily life.”

While the decision to move may have been easy, the ups and downs of being an artist wasn’t. “It was both easy and stressful once I decided to go out on my own. When you work for yourself, you work harder than you’ve ever worked for someone else. You can’t fire yourself and it’s tough to take vacations, but I’ve met some really wonderful people and travelled all over the world.”

Guli bought forty acres of land and moved his wife and children into a teepee while he built the first part of their soon to be home. Over the years, he would own storefronts, travel to West Fests across the country and set up booths to sell custom leather works all over the world. Eventually, he would settle into a little studio of his own making on his own land.

And that’s where he is today: a classically trained artist making unique and gorgeous leather products, clothes and paintings.

“I was trained in painting, but I love History and the more research I do, the more I found even native people did painting on their buckskins. They created such fine and beautiful garments. So, I’ve grown into doing more and more artistic pieces. I’m hand painting my buckskins and using different dyes. It’s married together my leather abilities and artistic skills. I’m happier today with my work than I’ve ever been before. I’m creating things I really like now.”

Painting on leather is not something the average person would expect from an artist. But, Guli’s life is full of things he wouldn’t have predicted.





“Years ago a man came to me with a buffalo hide and asked me if I could make him a coat.” Guli explained. “I was like, sure! And that was my first one. Now, I make a lot of them. Your life changes as different opportunities come to you. The key is being open to new things. You never want to block yourself from a new experience.”

An open attitude is Guli’s theme. It may have begun when he moved to Colorado or maybe when he first created wardrobe for extras on the mini-series *Centennial*, which led to more wardrobe work and a role in *The Mountain Men* with Charlton Heston. Guli’s name was a Hollywood go-to for historical leather work. Most recently, he finished production on the new Quentin Tarantino movie, *The Hateful Eight*.

It almost seems Guli has lived several lifetimes as a crafter, teacher, encourager, builder and actor. His role as an artist may be the most fulfilling for both himself and the patrons who’ve purchased his work for over forty years now.

“I don’t create for anyone but myself. When I do a painting, I sell it and it’s gone. I no longer think about it. I have created. I have made it and let it go. Now it’s out there, making other people happy.”

Yes Mr. Guli, it surely is. 🤠