

# Whipping up art

MULTI-AWARD WINNING LEATHER PLAITER AND WHIPMAKER, CHRIS BARR, HAS TURNED THE TRADE INTO A WORK OF ART.

STORY + PHOTOS **KERRY WEHLBURG**

**F**or Chris Barr, an artist from the Arcadia Valley, Qld, traditional bush art is a real passion. He has taken his trade of leather plaiting and whipmaking beyond a craft to an art form, with his finely crafted pieces winning him awards both in Australia and the US.

Chris' four entries into the 2004 Sydney Royal Easter Show all won a first place and he also received four standard of excellence awards. Furthermore, he has won awards at Australia's largest whip plaiting competition, the Northern NSW Whip Cracking and Plaiting Championships, and in 2005 Chris' bosal won the Best of Show first place in the braiding section of the prestigious Trappings of Texas Cowboy Gear and Art exhibit at the Museum of the Big Bend in Alpine, Texas. This exhibition represents the best contemporary cowboy gear makers and western artists and is by invitation only. Chris is the first Australian to be invited to exhibit in the braiding section – to win it was an added honour.

Two men were influential in Chris developing his love of horses and leather plaiting. After school, Chris worked on a property in Winton, Qld. His overseer, Frank Fleming, was a top horseman and under his guidance Chris' own horsemanship skills developed. While Chris was in Winton, Frank was presented with a 16-plait shot-loaded stockwhip made by local Alec Logan. "It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen," Chris says. "That whip inspired me to start plaiting." He started by making crackers and repairing faults on whips and today is a master of his art.

Chris has worked with horses in various places in Australia as well as in the United States and Austria, and has used these experiences to improve his plaiting and horsemanship skills. While in the US, Chris visited the Dorrance brothers (Tom Dorrance is well-known for his horse whispering techniques), and in Bill Dorrance Chris found a fellow plaiter with whom he could discuss the finer points of rawhide plaiting.

Australian plaiters are fortunate to be able to work with the world's strongest leather, kangaroo hide, which has a fine grain that can be cut into very thin strands. Chris cuts all his strings himself



using a technique known as thumbnail cutting. He tends to use kangaroo hide for his finer work and cowhide for working pieces, using both tanned and rawhide leather, some of which he dyes himself.

Originally Chris created his whip handle designs without committing them to paper, but as his work has evolved the patterns have become more complicated. He now uses graph paper and a computer to map the design. The detail in Chris' work is striking. The bosal that won Best of Show in Texas has a centrepiece with a 100-plait weave consisting of strands one millimetre wide. A lot of his work is done with 24 and 32 strands.

Chris' wife, Kerri, also plaits. The couple owns Dead Ringer Leather Works, with Kerri making most of the working gear that is sold locally while Chris works on collector pieces that are mostly exported to the US. "We were making bridles and whips for ourselves and people kept buying them, as we were the only Australians making western gear – people were mostly importing it from America," Kerri explains.

The Barrs are keen to build awareness of plaiting as an Australian outback art form. "The Americans have a huge cowboy culture," Chris says. "There is a large appreciation of this art form over there. In Australia, we don't have the same awareness of our bush art heritage." Dead Ringer Leather Works' sponsorship of horsemanship events and their show bridle for the Brisbane Broncos' football team's mascot promotes the company and creates cultural knowledge in Australia. The Barrs, together with other members of the Australian Plaiters and Whipmakers Association, are hoping to form an Australian equivalent of the American Traditional Cowboy Arts Association with the purpose of breeding Australian pride in this art genre.

In 2000, R.M. Williams purchased a rawhide bosal from Chris for his personal collection. "It was soon after Christmas," Chris says. "We had just got back from a trip away and unexpected guests had arrived – everything was a mess, with all the Christmas wrappings shoved into the workshop. I answered a phone call from the lady at the Maidenwell [Qld] store. She said she had R.M. Williams there having a cup of tea – he had been driving around for two hours, looking for our place. I yelled to Kerri that we had 20 minutes to get the place looking decent as R.M. Williams was on his way to visit. She didn't believe me at first!"

Chris Barr with his leather work. Inset: The Barrs' horse wearing a bridle and reins that were crafted by Chris. Opposite page: The bosal that won Best in Show at Texas.

