

Cayuse Gallery



Preserving a Legacy

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— Mary Schmitt

When Mary Schmitt, owner of Cayuse Western Americana, sees one of the antiques in her shop, she doesn't see weathered, worn leather and beads—she sees a story of our western heritage and an opportunity to share that legacy. "It's like a never ending pool of information," Schmitt explained. "Every day, I come into work and learn something. I love selling items and placing them with people who have the same level of enthusiasm."

She speaks of the horsehair bridles that were made in territorial prisons in Laramie and all over the West, how the skill was learned from the Spaniards who had learned it from the Moors. She shares how this ancient skill is still in practice and how, when a person from North Africa or Spain walks into her shop, she can tell them how they have a direct link to the American West. With a curator's eye, she discerns whether an item is a quality antique or whether well-meaning restoration has made the item lose its original integrity.

Schmitt has a skilled eye for detail, telling how old an item is by the popularity of colors and materials used in different eras and she can even explain who likely used each item and in what way. She says a pair of bright, beaded gloves were likely worn by a Wild West show person. "People in the stands were viewing with opera glasses," Schmitt explained. "The performers wanted to stand out with loud, vibrant and outrageous outfits."

Schmitt's love of art and culture was cultivated early in life. She spent a large part of her childhood in Europe and had the opportunity to travel extensively. "When I moved back to the U.S. at the age of 14, it was like a foreign country," Schmitt said. "I wanted to explore it." During her time readjusting to life in the U.S., she spent a lot of time with horses and started asking questions about why saddles were shaped differently, piquing her curiosity about western items and the stories and history behind them.

After college in Northern California, Schmitt spent 10 years in the "corporate rat race" as she calls it, working in Southern California's high tech industry, encouraging people to buy product after product.

"It started getting to me," she recalled. "I didn't feel very honest about where the physical junk was going to go—to the landfill." The antique business was the antithesis of the disposable throw-away culture she found problematic. She began moonlighting at antique shows and her business grew until she finally decided to move to Jackson and jump into the antiques business full-time in 1997, a career she finds deeply meaningful. "I want to preserve and promote our Western roots and culture," Schmitt said. "People my age and older are collecting. Younger people are so far removed from the events that shaped us. I want to light the flame. Someone has to continue caring for culture and legacy and show beautiful and functional art from the West." ■

Creating, enhancing
& protecting
the smiles of Jackson Hole



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