

# Boot-Scootin' Bags

Fashionable boots take on a second life.

By **Nancy Dorman-Hickson**

**S**ome boots were made for walking—others, we find, are made for carrying as stylish bags. It takes vision to turn footwear into portable fashion. Kara Coats knows how to transform boots with her artistry. Clients include Dolly Parton, Martina McBride, Pam Tillis, and Terri Clark, so she must be doing something right.

When Kara buys boots, she considers color and design but never comfort. "I don't even care if they're the same size," says the artist who was thrilled to discover a store with an attic full of mismatched boots. Odd pairings don't matter to a bagmaker.

**Boot Hill Central** A spare bedroom in the Spring Hill home of Kara, husband Jeff, and their 5-year-old son, Mason, serves as her workstation. Here finished bags drape a wrought iron gate post she found in an antiques shop. Leather boots in red, orange, yellow, pink, blue, white, brown, and black clutter the floor. Most feature stitched and cutout designs, ranging from flowers to butterflies. Colorful semiprecious stones, from tiger eye to turquoise, rest next to works in progress.

In between mom duties, Kara churns out her stylish creations using a leather-sewing machine found at a boot factory. First, she cuts off the pointy-toed or blunt-shaped foot of the boot. "I probably have 20 pairs of scissors that need to be sharpened," she says ruefully, referring to fallout from slicing tough leather. Next, she adds, "You turn the boot inside out to sew it." After stitching together one end to form the bottom of the bag, she rights the leather once again so that the original design shows.

**Bejeweled Bootery** The artist especially enjoys fabricating colorful straps for the bags, choosing stones and metalwork that mesh well with the boot's original design. "It's fun to think, 'I have



Kara Coats uses semi-precious stones and sterling silver to create straps for her boot bags. The Western flair appeals to women who take their fashion with a dash of fun.

this piece of leather, and I have this stone that would be great with that boot," she says. "That's when my creative wheels start turning."

The bags come in as many colors and patterns as there are boots. "Some people like them made with brand-new boots, and some people like run-down ones," Kara says. She takes custom orders too. "People can send their own boots," she adds.

**Horse Sense** "Designing these bags is an extension of the love I have for horses," says Kara, an award-winning equestrian. She has shown competitively at Madison Square Garden, the American Quarter Horse Association Championship Show, and the World's Championship Horse Show.

She and her husband met through the horse-riding community. Between them the couple now owns three horses. His two stay at his parents' home in Leipers Fork, while Kara's palomino beds down at a nearby stable.

## Bag One of Your Own

Order the boot bags online at [www.designsbykara.com](http://www.designsbykara.com), or call (615) 405-2861 to find out about retail outlets and crafts shows featuring her products. Prices range from \$100 to \$400, depending on materials used.

**Calling All Cowgirls** "In the garage I had every color boot imaginable," she recalls. "I would store things in them, odds and ends like nails. I thought, 'It would be neat to carry one of these.'" After six months, she came up with the process to create her durable, beautiful bags.

Kara confidently believed she knew her market—other horse folks. But the bags' widespread appeal surprised her.

"The people who like them the most are the hip, trendy women—those who are into funky, fun stuff," she says.

Kara's boot bags charm women of all ages. "I think people like having something unique and completely handmade," she says. The bags show up at all kinds of occasions too. "My mom has a black one with a lot of sheen that she carries to the opera and the symphony," says Kara.

Whether worn at the opera or the Grand Ole Opry, the boot bag proves as alluring as its inspiration—a much-loved symbol of the West. ●

