

J. Robert Buck

LEATHER

the new
frontier

art



STOCK NO. 1914

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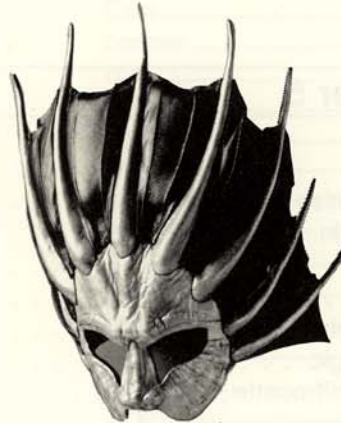
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Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------|-----------|
| Contributors | IV |
|---------------------|-----------|

| | |
|------------------|----------|
| Chapter 1 | 1 |
|------------------|----------|

| | |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Leather is natural | 1 |
| Leather is Conservation | 2 |
| Making Leather | 2 |
| Art and Leather in History | 2 |
| Early History | 3 |
| Leather & Art in North America | 10 |
| Leather Today | 11 |
| Leather's place in creative art | 12 |
| Leather as a viable art medium | 13 |
| Leather isn't expensive | 13 |



Mask by John Jeanpierre, Germany

| | |
|------------------|-----------|
| Chapter 2 | 14 |
|------------------|-----------|

| | |
|--|----|
| Tanning | 14 |
| Leather Types | 16 |
| Leather comes in different thicknesses | 21 |
| Buying leather | 21 |
| Leather care | 22 |
| Preparing a pattern | 24 |



"Gold-Rush" by Dave Beck, Tandy Leather Co.

| | |
|------------------|-----------|
| Chapter 3 | 24 |
|------------------|-----------|

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Cutting Leather | 25 |
| Collages Alive | 26 |
| Using Glue and Adhesives | 27 |
| Molding Leather | 27 |
| Warning | 28 |
| Shaping Leather | 30 |
| Mask Making | 31 |
| Sculpture | 33 |



3 Lamp Shades by Selim, Ibiza/Spain

| | |
|------------------|-----------|
| Chapter 4 | 34 |
|------------------|-----------|

| | |
|--------|----|
| Wood | 34 |
| Metal | 35 |
| Canvas | 36 |

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Ceramics | 36 |
| Sand | 37 |
| Stone | 38 |
| Product design | 38 |



Untitled work by Mara Ben Dov, Israel

Chapter 5

40

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Natural Finish | 41 |
| Dye & Stain | 43 |
| Paint | 47 |
| Finishes | 48 |
| Dyeing Rules | 50 |
| Resist magic | 52 |
| Dyeing a silhouette | 52 |
| Block Dyeing | 53 |
| Black Dye | 54 |
| Leather as dye | 54 |

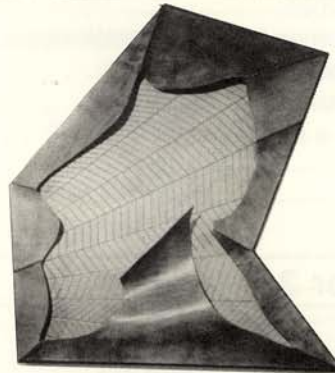


Mayan figure by Tom Lay, Australia

Chapter 6

55

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Cutting Lines | 55 |
| Getting design depth | 58 |
| Cutting strips | 60 |
| Drawing borders | 61 |
| Finishing edges | 63 |
| Folding edges | 64 |
| Folding and gouges | 64 |
| Making holes and slots | 65 |
| Splitting leather | 65 |

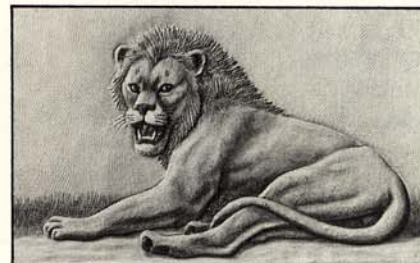


Verschie Bung by John Jean Pierre, Germany

Chapter 7

66

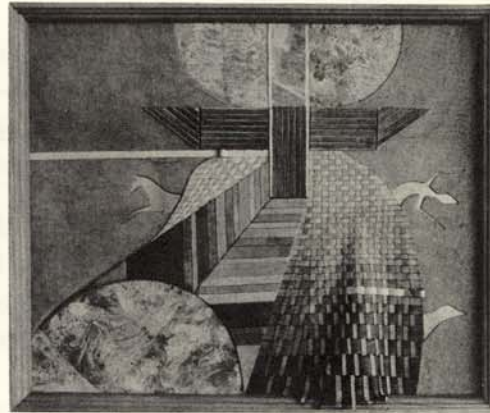
| | |
|---|----|
| Stamping tools | 66 |
| Stamping designs | 67 |
| Borders | 67 |
| Using everyday items for design | 68 |
| Mass produce a design | 69 |
| Carving | 70 |
| 3-D Carving | 72 |



Lion figure carving by Al Stohlman

Chapter 8**73**

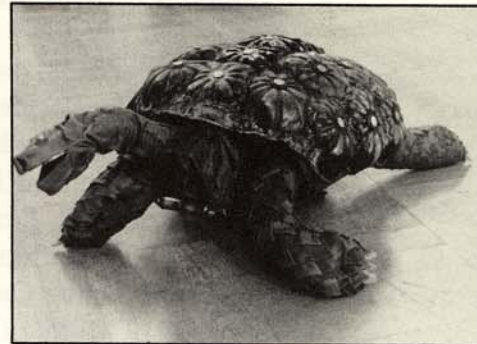
| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Modern art forms | 73 |
| Using suede | 76 |
| Painting suede | 77 |
| Wearable art | 77 |
| Layered art | 78 |
| Embossed Leather | 79 |
| Specialized background | 80 |
| Leather covering | 81 |
| Mobiles | 81 |
| Wall hanging | 82 |
| Lace | 83 |
| Applique | 83 |
| Macrame | 84 |
| Fastener Choices | 85 |



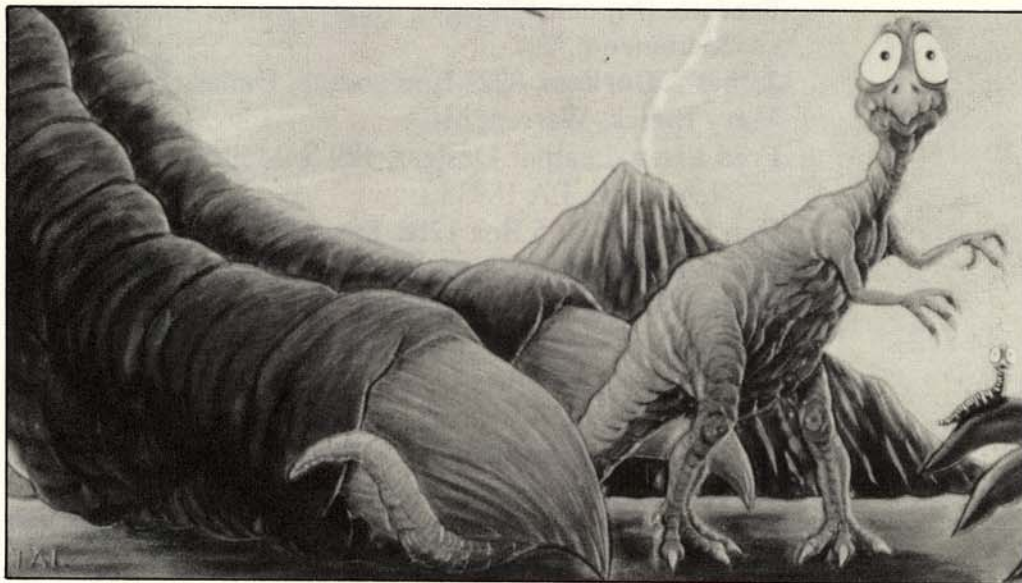
"Jemyna" by Violete Tamosavskaitė, Lithuania

Chapter 9**85**

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Temporary Cement | 86 |
| Permanent Cement | 86 |
| Overlap Joints | 89 |
| Invisible Joints | 89 |
| Metal Fasteners | 90 |
| Leather Lacing | 92 |
| Sewing Leather | 93 |
| Snaps | 94 |



"Turtle" by Stephanie Rothmund, Germany

Index -**96**

"Dinosaurs" Figure carving by Tony Laier, Tandy Leather Co.



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Chapter 1

Leather and Art History

What is a work of art? Is it something mysterious created and set apart? Does one have to be educated to appreciate art? Many say the answer is NO! Art is the result of human skill and expression. It can take many forms and take advantage of different materials. It brings joy and pleasure to the artist and the viewer. Leather and art have been a team for much of history.

Leather is an **incredible** fiber. It brings a unique medium to help you display balance, pattern, design, color, and form. Leather has the unique quality of letting water and air pass through. That's why so many people value it for shoes. Yes, good leather shoes are more comfortable and last a long time. It also has an unusual system of fibrous strands that give it strength. Leather is one of the strongest and most flexible flat materials known. It is hard to tear or puncture. Certain kinds of leather will adapt easily to molding and stretching.

Leather is natural



As in the past, leather today comes as a by-product of the meat industry. Once early people discovered that animal skins had value beyond food, the leather industry was born. This was probably long before written language. Leather became a part of many early cultures in different parts of the world. There is evidence of leather use from the Far East, the Near East, Europe and the New World.

Leather is Conservation

No, we don't kill animals for leather like we do trees for wood or paper. Refusing to use leather won't save a single animal. The demand for meat as food, from most of the world's people helps make leather possible and available. Making leather is more an expression of conservation than taking advantage of helpless animals. It is an answer to a need to find a use for an existing by-product. Today we think of the Native American Indian as a true conservationist. They used leather in almost every area of their lives. Their reason for using leather was the same as ours today. The skins are available and the finished product is so useful.



Most leather comes from cattle

Making Leather

Animal skins allowed to dry, become hard and crack when forced to bend. A natural skin decays quickly and becomes useless. Ancient people discovered a tanning method to treat the skins to keep them soft and preserved. We believe the early Hebrews and Egyptians discovered tanning. They replaced the crude process of early people and made strong, beautiful, and reliable leather. We know the Hebrews used tree bark, roots of certain trees, wood ash, alum, and salt to make leather. Raw scraped hides went in large vats with the crushed ingredients between the skins. They filled the vat with water and sealed it tightly. SIX MONTHS later, the finished leather was ready to come out.



Oak tree bark is used for tanning.

Skins go through major changes in a modern tannery. With great skill, tanners combine modern technology with ancient knowledge to preserve, protect, and improve leather quality. From unwanted leftovers from the meat industry, a new product is born. It becomes a butterfly unleashed from its' cocoon. The resulting leather in the hands of the artist can become a true art medium.

Art and Leather in History

Art and leather combined may be older than recorded history. Although we don't know for sure, it seems reasonable to think that animal skins became works of art. Before weaving cloth, all clothes were of leather. They offered the prehistoric artist a medium for expression. Almost every region or civilization has leather usage as a part of its' history. No, not just in shoes, clothes, and belts, but in art.

Each area in the world created a unique way to design, color, and shape leather. If one studies art, you can't avoid leather as you look at the art of countries such as Morocco, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Egypt. Craftsmen brought art to their designs of everyday objects made from leather. Their art reflected the culture, religion, and the world around them.

If we look back before recorded history, we find evidence of the creative impulse expressed through stone, wood, bone and leather. Today's artists use these same materials among hundreds or thousands of others. Leather stands apart from all the rest. It has a unique feel, texture, look, and smell. It excites and confronts all the senses. No other medium has so many ways to challenge the artist. Leather carries the sense of the raw material through to the finished work of art.

Early History

Early art often took the form of setting an everyday item apart from all others. It could be through a painting, statue or the design on the leather seat of a chair. Art found its way into unusual places. In early times, it was a way to recall a battle, animal track, special event or flower. Much art served as an aid to carry out a religious act.



Early art often copied natural designs.

Art of any form had to be light and easy to carry. Early people had to carry their art with them. Before recognized towns and cities, most people were nomads who traveled with their animals or in search of game. Even their tents were leather to keep out the rain and cold of the night. Leather shields of different shapes and patterns helped soldiers identify the enemy. The design and shape was as clear to them as uniform markings are to us today. When survival wasn't a full time job, they left their art where they could.

Most early tools and possessions have vanished with time. This would be especially true of clothes, sandals, or other leather items. Cave paintings from those times give us a glimpse of the importance of animals and their skins. Our earliest written record comes from the Bible. In Genesis 3:21 it says, "*And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.*"

It may surprise you that it is impossible to talk about the history of art without including leather. Leather art goes back before recorded history. We know that's true because the earliest records from seven thousand years ago show leather usage as a well advanced art. It wasn't something just developed in a few years. We know that soldiers from the Middle East in 1800 B.C. wore leather helmets, a girdle with several inch wide fringe, and belts.

The ability to make and use leather could go back as far as twenty thousand years. Leather art doesn't begin or end with the Egyptians but our earliest surviving examples begin with them. Outside of Egypt, rain and dampness destroyed much of the early art.

Egypt



In Egypt, animals were an important part of life in their earliest history. It is only natural that they would discover and use leather at an early time. We can prove that leather was in Egypt hundreds of years before King Tut was born. It began as rawhide and then to more flexible skins. Finally there is evidence of real leather. The art of tanning was so popular that an entire section of Thebes, the capital, was set aside for the leather workers. Leather wall

hangings decorated the walls of the wealthy. Their climate and hidden tombs protected many items. Well protected Egyptian graves before 5,000 B.C. gave up some early leather treasures. These included sandals, bags, and cushions. The early Egyptians used leather for the floor and tires of their chariots. They used leather for small boats, cups, bottles, armor, rope, and even for windows. Yes, I did say windows. Rawhide, leather that hasn't been through the tanning process is translucent. That means that you can't see through it but light will pass through. It is much like the frosted glass you often see in bathrooms.



Egyptian art often reflected their religion.

Close your eyes and try to picture the inside of an Egyptian Palace. The finest artists made items for the Pharaoh to use. In your imagination can you see the paintings on the walls or the carving on the throne? Do you think the leather was plain or did it take the most artistic form possible? You and I both know the answer to that. Everything around those early leaders was the best anyone could do. The art was far from simple. Leather combined with expensive metal like gold was common. The artists of this time and area were also famous for their geometric designs and bright colors. King Tut's (Tut-ankhamun) tomb held a stool with a leather seat and calf skin sandals.

Tomb models from about 2,000 B.C. show highly decorated shields made from leather. These were light, strong, and helped identify the soldier. Each shield was highly decorated with paint and

dyes of red, yellow, and green. Leather that doesn't bend such as that in a shield take paint well. Leather that bends doesn't hold the paint as well. The paint doesn't bend with the leather. It cracks and falls away. Early dyes made from crushed insect bodies soak into the leather. These dyes kept their color as the leather bent because they were inside of the fibers.

The Egyptians used leather for writing too. Several early Egyptian leather scrolls are in the British Museum in London, England.

As we follow art and leather through history, it touches every major group of people. Each had special art forms we remember them for today. Each of these groups of people had a common thread. They all had different ways of using and decorating leather.

Greece



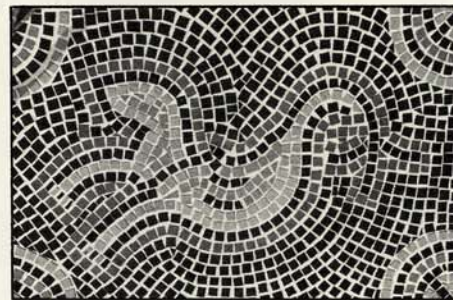
We all know the early Greeks used designs on their pottery. They give us a look at the art through scenes on bowls and vases. The Greeks used pictures on some pottery to show every day life. They tell us much of what we know about them today. A bowl made 500 years before the birth of Christ, shows a leather worker making bags, shoes, and wine bottles. It even points out a cutting tool much like one sold by Tandy today!

The Greeks did much more for art than decorate bowls and vases. They took much of their

culture and art to other areas through trade. Early Greek writers such as Homer and Herodotus told us of other civilizations that used leather. Some mention clothing only while others tell about leather as a writing surface.

It's over three thousand years ago. Can you picture a Greek merchant ship sailing across the Mediterranean? Look at the sails. Even the sails were leather as were the shoes, gloves, and bags owned by the crew. Look at the hinges on cabin doors. They were leather too. The early Greek ships were made with leather covering willows too fragile for boats.

Little of their leather art remains because of the climate. From tombs, we see how the Greeks used art everywhere. We also know



Roman mosaics were popular art forms.

they used leather for many purposes. It isn't hard to imagine their art played a large part in leather objects.

Rome

The Romans gave much to the world through their building. Many Roman arches are still standing and used today. They made their homes works of art and included leather in many areas of dress.

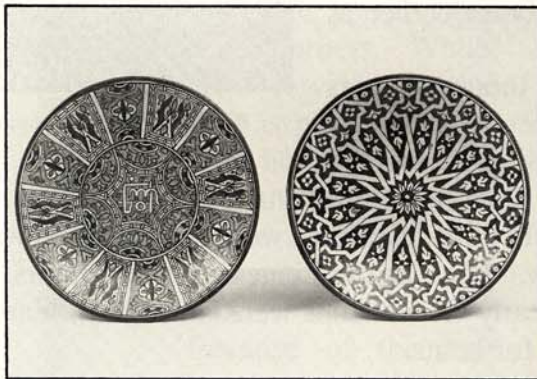
Let's say you were to draw a Roman Soldier from when Rome ruled most of the known world. Your drawing would have to show leather armor. Perhaps the higher the rank, the more artistic work would appear on the armor. A soldier would not have gone into battle without a leather helmet and shield. The Romans

used leather in a way not found in other civilizations. During one period, the romans used leather as a basis for their money. Much of their writing was on thin leather in the form of scrolls. These were long sheets rolled from one or both ends for storage.



East African knife and sheath from the Smithsonian Institution.

North Africa



Typical North African Designs from Smithsonian Institution.

North Africa was home to several advanced nations. Their art spread to all of the Mediterranean area. They created unique designs for buildings, furniture, and clothes. Their leather knife sheathes, clothes, bags, and leather books are still popular and world famous. North African use of leather as an art form stands above all the rest for complex designs. Their leather braiding and art spread to Spain and Italy. The leather bag became a true work of art. As you read

this, there are many shops in and around Florence, Italy where no two items are alike. The artist treats every project like a painter with canvas. While the artist and the shop are Italian, some designs and techniques began ages ago in North Africa.

The art of this area was easily recognized because of the designs. Many of these were in bright colors. They found how to stamp gold patterns into to the leather as well. This technique of using gold for leather decoration spread to all of Europe.

Because of weather, most early African Leather no longer exists. What we can find are uses that took centuries to develop. The quality of the work varied from crude bags to exotic highly decorated fine art. Many kinds of musical instruments and rattles were leather. Tribal drums used for communication, and ceremonies show the use of leather with other materials. Many drums still exist which use pottery and rawhide together. The drum head is rawhide as are the laces to keep it tight. The lace pattern was triangular in shape and a work of art. Drums were in many shapes from squares only an inch high to the long cylinder shaped drums almost two feet across.

Leather shields became the canvas for tribal artists. Rawhide shields are strong, easy to shape, and light in weight. Designs on these shields range from simple to complex. Red, black, and white were popular early colors. They identify the soldier, tribe, and provide an outlet for artistic expression.

Europe

We only know a little about Europe before recorded history. In graves, people found scraps of leather clothing. These came from graves in bogs with moisture but no air. In spite of the water, some leather scraps exist. We know these people had leather but can only imagine the uses. In a woodcut from the sixteenth century, a tanner appears at his work. It was by Josef Amman who worked in Nuremberg, Germany.



Musical instruments using rawhide from Smithsonian Instit.

Another from the same time shows an air bed made from leather inflated with bellows. It was a good idea, but the materials of the time probably kept it from working. The climate of Europe has erased almost everything from the distant past. Only stone and metal art survived.

As Europe came into the Middle Ages, books replaced scrolls. They held everything from legal

documents to the Bible. Books appeared hundreds of years before the invention of paper and printing. Early books are handwritten on leather pages. Each page was often a work of art. Artists wrote the first letter as a complex design. These "illuminated" letters became a most important art form of the age. The cover of the books often included gold stamping. The idea came from nations in North Africa. Books were so valuable at that time that only the church and kings could afford them.

Fifty years before Columbus set sail, leather joined the world of fine art. The Italian artist Castagno painted "The Youthful David" on leather over wood in 1450. His work among others used leather as a surface for painting. This work hangs today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Leather guilds grew in Europe and Africa. Artists and merchants formed these organizations for many reasons. The guild was for members in a certain town or district. They tried to limit who could work in an art form or type of business. This didn't do much to improve creativity. Guilds did refine ideas and improve the quality of their art. Some methods mastered by these guilds over a thousand years ago, continue to be popular today.

The Spanish used the African art of gold stamping. They combined it with bright paints. Spanish used leather for table tops, wall hangings, and furniture included their best artistic abilities. At last, other items appeared, made only for their beauty. These artists



Tribal drum from Smithsonian Institution.

didn't forget the more usable art objects. They changed the world by making leather saddles that were comfortable, practical, and beautiful. They brought art to the saddle by using the best of their art in the saddle design.

New World

As the Spanish began their exploration of Mexico and the Southwest they brought their art from Spain. These men were on the move constantly. The only art they could own or carry were designs cut into their saddles, belts, bags, and holsters. At first, they brought craftsmen with them. As the area of their exploration expanded, and their Spanish gear wore out, skilled craftsmen weren't always available. The explorers began to use crude tools to design replacements. An art form was born that grew and prospered to current times.

In South America, the Spanish and Native Indian influence produced interesting results. European craftsmanship combined with local designs, colors, and uses exists today. Aztec and Inca designs and local floral patterns make their work unique. Braiding, popular



Sioux moccasins from Smithsonian Institution.

in Europe and with Native People developed into the **bolus**. It is a three strand throwing weapon to tangle the feet of a running animal or enemy. Many are works of art because of the involved braiding and designs of the covering of the weights at the end.

Leather & Art in North America

Early Eskimo people wore leather clothing. The women cut and shaped the early clothes with stone knives. They punched holes with

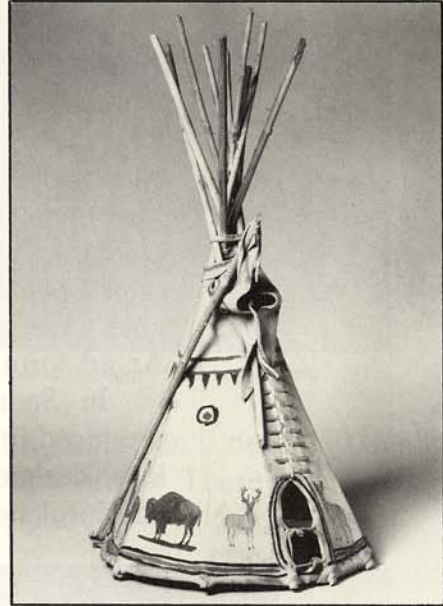
a bone bodkin so they could use a light bone needle and thread. Their light summer moccasins were from seal skin and worn in dances in what is now North Western Canada. A design of parallel lines were tooled into the surface as a decoration. This same design appears on carvings done by Ice Age people. The early Eskimo people also made painted rawhide masks to use in ceremonies. They were worn to give thanks to the spirits for giving them luck with hunting and fishing. The masks ranged from life-like to very imaginative creations combining leather with wood and feathers.



Carrying case from Smithsonian Institution.

visor and a waterproof seal skin jacket. They also used open boats in the summer made by stretching skins over a wooden frame. Even Eskimo dogs wore leather harnesses.

The Indian tribes in what is now Southern Canada and the United States used leather for clothes, ceremonial objects, and



Tipi model from Smithsonian Institution.

The Alaska kayak was made from rawhide and painted with imaginary animals. Some of these run the entire length of the kayak. The design almost looks Egyptian with only the front and back of the animal to scale. The hunter wore a leather sun



War record on leather from the Smithsonian Institution.

bags. They used it to make cases for headdresses, dolls, drums, and for building homes. Several tribes played a game where a leather ball had to be caught in a scoop with leather laces. The tipi covering was in the shape of a slice of watermelon. It was made by stitching a number of hides together. The tipi was more than just a leather shelter from the weather. It was a standing work of art. Most were covered with designs in many colors.

When we think of Indian dress, moccasins come to mind. These did exist. Highly decorated moccasins varied in design from tribe to tribe. These moccasins combined leather with other materials such as beads and porcupine quills. They weren't the only shoes worn. Some tribes made boots and sandals much like the "flip-flops" popular in North America today.

Much of their leatherwork including clothes was highly decorated with paints and dyes. Blue, red, yellow, and green were popular colors. Painted ceremonial rattles were two pieces of painted rawhide stitched together with pebbles inside. The Native American Indians saw leather as a natural art material.

Some of the Plains Indians used hides as a canvas. They drew battle, hunting, and ceremonial scenes on the entire skin. It became part of the heritage of the tribe. Some of the remaining skins are filled with complex patterns and color combinations. A few were for decoration and had no use other than as an expression of the artist.

Examples of these Native American products are on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C..

Leather Today

Leather did become typecast in this century into two groups. It became popular with summer camp crafts and Southwestern leather products. Let's look at why that happened and its roots in art.

Charles Tandy, the force behind Tandy Leather Company, loved Mexican and Indian Art. He wanted other Americans to realize they could be successful with it as well. Tandy wasn't an artist. He was in the leather business. He saw art as something to duplicate. If one billfold design was beautiful, one hundred thousand copies of the same design were wonderful. It was good for business. Artists saw



Traditional Western style carved billfold kit.

copied designs differently. Some saw these copies as something terrible. They weren't art and the true artist would avoid leather at all costs. It became a craft material after most of the art world in the North America threw it away.

This is not an apology for Charles Tandy's efforts. Nor is it an apology for laced comb cases. Most of us use but don't create art. Copying designs gave pride, joy, and helped many people feel good about their craft. Those of us who have little gift in art can be aware of beauty through the work of others. Some can only see success through step by step actions to copy art created by someone else. Leather has also inspired many artists.

In the 1960's many folk artists went back into the artistic past. They found the beauty in the plain and useful designs of our ancestor's work. From colonial times through the Civil War, many farm and hill people spent most of their time trying to survive. Their art was simple, plain, and beautiful. Their designs became high fashion and their leather bags were popular from New York to California. Soon these modern day craftsmen began to realize the unique capabilities of leather as an art medium. Some threw away the copies and began to try free standing sculpture, masks, mobiles, and leather clothes design.



An abstract design by Paul Burnett.

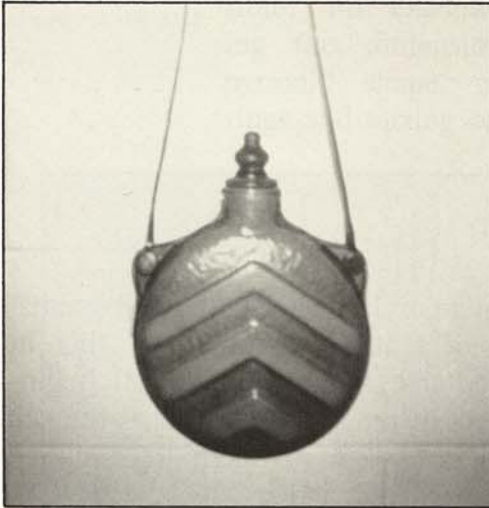
Leather's place in creative art

Leather offers today's artist even more than our ancestors dreamed possible. Modern processing makes today's leathers colorful, water resistant, and flexible. Yes, it can still be a part of clothes, shoes, belts, and luggage. But there is more, much more. Some of today's leather molds into shapes and then keeps the new shape. Does that start you thinking?

Today we have so many materials to display our art. Some people would have you believe that leather as an art medium has taken a place on a dusty shelf of history. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Leather as a viable art medium

Some artists see the future in the leather and tools Tandy sold. They created museum works that used three dimensional carving to combine sculpture and painting. Most designs had nothing to do with the art of the Southwest.



An antique style water bottle. (John Craig)

Leather gives the artist a unique material. It takes paint like canvas but adds a third dimension as well. Leather art could copy the look of carved wood but is flexible. The artist can mold, shape, fold and gouge leather like clay to create a design. It is better in some ways than clay because the finished work of art doesn't break like hardened clay.

You can easily cut leather with scissors, knives, and special cutting tools. Some leather strips can tow a car but elementary school students can cut them without any danger. Modern inexpensive strap cutters make dangerous cutting safe for anyone. Joining leather pieces opens other doors. Artists use glue, thread, metal fasteners, and leather strips to fasten pieces together.

Leather isn't expensive

Cost has kept many people from using leather for their art. Leather is valuable by itself before the artist brings their skill to the raw material. Leather is no more expensive today than it was twenty or thirty years ago. That's true when you compare it with the price of a loaf of bread or a car over the same period. The feature that makes leather a good value is that every tiny piece is art waiting to happen. Leather scrap doesn't exist in the true artist's eyes. Leather jewelry can even be as beautiful as precious metals.



Even the smallest pieces can be art. (Alex Moliviatis)

Chapter 2

Leather in Many Forms

Saying that all leathers are alike is like saying that all paints are alike. There are four types of leather discussed in this book. Rawhide, oil, chrome, and vegetable tanned leather all begin the same way. Most leathers, in spite of their looks, begin as the skin of a steer or other animals. We discussed, in the first chapter, that making leather began before written language.

Tanning

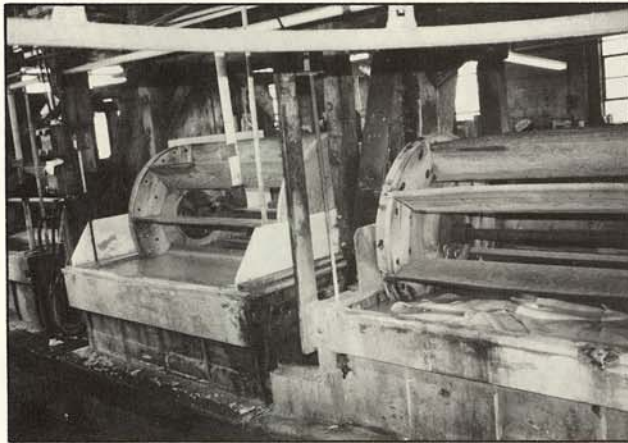
This is the process of turning the skin into leather. Tanners must be skilled chemists. First, they remove the natural fats and oils from the raw skin. Tanning then replaces these oils with other chemicals. Each tanning method brings special effects and creates a different kind of leather. Tanners give leather unique properties of interest to the artist.



A tannery looks like any other business from the outside
courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



The raw hides come from the meat packers. Courtesy
of Hermann Oak Leather Company



Paddles and lime water take the hair off the hide
Courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



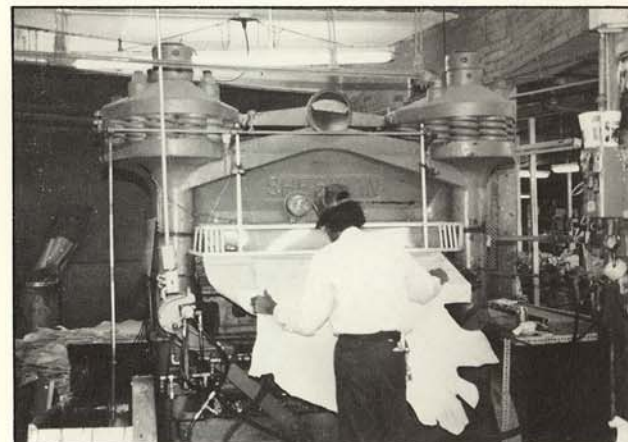
The skins soak in pits for up to a month
Courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



Drums which turn and add chemicals to the skin
Courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



This setting machine smooths out the damp leather.
Courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



After drying, this 400 ton press flattens the leather.
Courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



The finished leather lays in stacks waiting for delivery.
Courtesy of Hermann Oak Leather Company



Whole sides are split for correct thickness.
Hermann Oak Leather Company



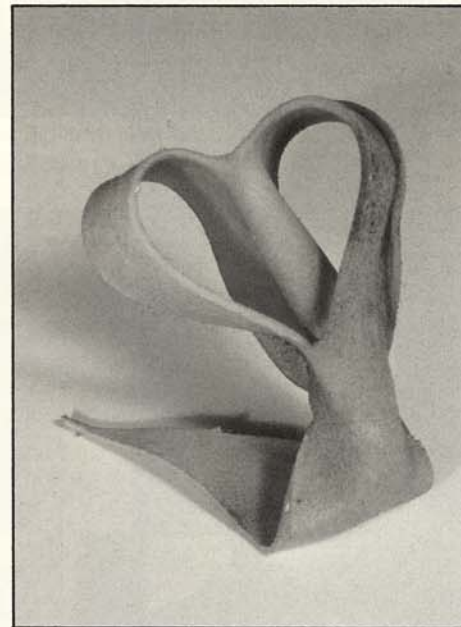
The finished leather is rolled and packaged for shipment.
Hermann Oak Leather Company

Leather Types

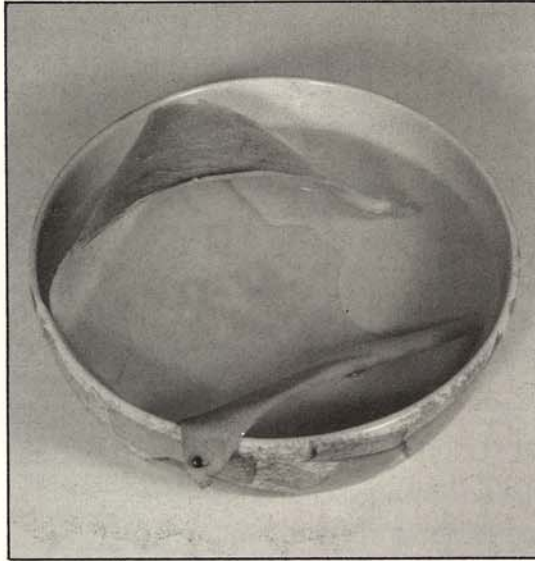
Rawhide isn't truly raw but cured with salt to preserve and protect the skin. The salt processing removes some chemicals naturally occurring in the skin. The finished product is hard, difficult to cut, and almost impossible to bend. It is also translucent (light passes through) in appearance. If you ask what good it is, we need to go further. This is an exciting material for the artist!

Many stores use the word rawhide incorrectly for other leathers. For example, rawhide laces for boots aren't rawhide. If you tied your boots with real rawhide, you would only do it once. First, you would have to wet the rawhide laces to get them to bend so you could lace the boots. Once the laces dried, you would have to cut them off the boots. The dog bones available in your supermarket are rawhide. Most ancient and most modern drum heads are rawhide.

Rawhide comes in skins like other leathers. These can be almost as thin as paper or so heavy that you need help to roll the skin. Soaking rawhide in water for hours makes it flexible. Once



Rawhide sculpture by Harry Moore



Soak rawhide in water at least over night.

it dries, rawhide shrinks and keeps its' shape even under abuse. Try to bend a dry rawhide dog bone. Dry rawhide takes paint well. You can paint with a brush or airbrush. Does this information get you thinking?

Did you say "It would be great for sculpture!" You're right, it does make unusual sculpture. It makes an even better mask or mobile. You can take wet rawhide and stretch it over a form or mold it directly. Be careful that you allow a way to remove the form after drying. I saw a head done by using a balloon as the form for thin rawhide. It was easy to break the balloon after the rawhide dried. Some rawhide art work needs some

support as the skin dries.

Rawhide shrinks when it dries. Early people used this property of rawhide to pull heads tight on drums.



Problems - We have to be honest. There are problems with rawhide. It can be hard to cut or form. Dry rawhide is so tough and hard that you must take great care when cutting with a knife. The blade can slip, and you get your blood all over the leather. It may be an old joke, but that's something we want to avoid at all costs. A better way is to useather shears to cut the skin. They give you more control than a knife. (See shears in Chapter 3.)

The most serious¹ problem is that no two skins behave the same way. After soaking in water for 24 hours, one skin may be as soft as a



Rawhide mask by Larry Verret

wet dish cloth. Another might be difficult to mold after 48 hours of soaking.

Another problem is uneven stretching and shrinking. One skin will stretch easily while another will stretch only a little. To make the problem more difficult, most skins stretch more from top to bottom than from one end to another. This makes your sculpture or form uneven unless you are careful.

If you say "That's more trouble than it's worth." then you haven't tried rawhide

YET! There is a great reward for the artist using rawhide. The flexibility of wet rawhide allows the artist a material unlike any other. The finished art is strong, light, and translucent. Adding light behind or inside your work opens a new dimension for creative directions.

Oil tanned leather called latigo is perfect for shoe laces. The finished leather is water resistant, flexible, and strong. It doesn't change after soaking in water. Some boots or objects exposed to weather often use latigo. It doesn't need any special protective finish because of the tanning. Latigo frequently comes with a yellow or dark brown surface. There is a unique quality of interest to the artist too.

Cutting or gouging brown latigo reveals a bright yellow



Cutting rawhide with Super Shears.



Brown latigo designed with a gouge.

interior. This property lets the artist with a safe and adjustable depth gouge get striking results immediately. All cuts and gouges are yellow. This happens wherever the interior of the leather shows through the surface.

Chrome tanned leather is what we see most often. Tanneries mix chromium sulfate with other chemicals. They dissolve them in water and use them to replace the natural oils. This tanning produces soft, water resistant, long wearing leather. Chrome Tanning is the most commonly used method of tanning today.

Most leather you see as finished goods is chrome tanned. We find it in clothes, shoes, luggage and upholstery. It can be thin suede, or a heavy belt.

Most chrome tanned leather comes painted or dyed. Painted



A coat of chrome leather by Marie Potter.

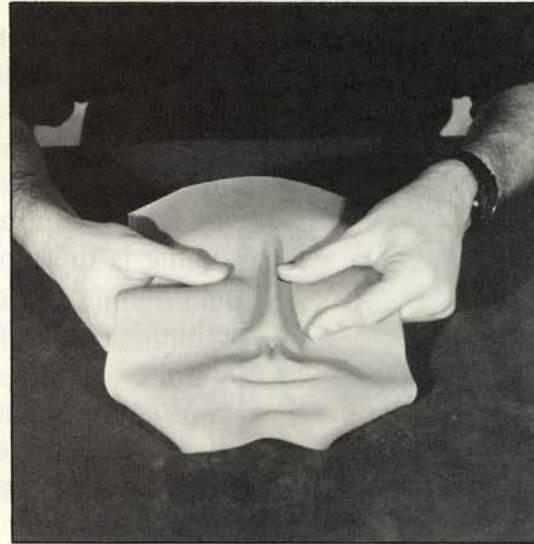
leather combines color and finish that doesn't sink in deeply. It covers most of the natural grain and comes in bright colors. Like stain on wood, leather dye penetrates leaving the natural grain visible. Dyed leather needs a finish to seal and protect the surface.

Chrome tanned leather allows the artist to mix different textures and colors. It comes pre-finished and water resistant. The artist cuts, joins pieces, and covers other materials. A **collage** takes on a new look by taking advantage of the special nature of chrome tanned leathers.

Vegetable tanned leather opens a new world of possibilities. Oak bark, among other chemicals, turns skins into a remarkable art medium. It allows the artist to use countless tools to manipulate the shape and surface. In addition, you can paint, dye, and cut this leather easily.

It absorbs water. That doesn't sound exciting until you understand what capabilities that gives to this type of leather. Once vegetable tanned leather is moist (not soggy), you can:

- **mold** it into a new shape (drying makes the shape permanent)
- **press** designs into the surface
- **cut** part way through the leather and compress one side of the cut (allows 3-dimensional lines and designs)
- **change** the texture of the surface
- **stretch** to add length or mold over another shape



Use your hands to mold the damp vegetable tanned leather.



Molded leather faces by Marie Potter.

- **add** relief by pressing from behind to stretch a small section of a design

Think about the possibilities! Vegetable tanned leather lets you combine painting with sculpture. Molding, imprinting, and layering give you three ways to add a third dimension to your work. It combines some of the best properties of rawhide and chrome tanned leather with fewer problems.

Vegetable tanned leather is more consistent. Unless it is too dry, it bends easily every time. You can vary the texture and color easily. You aren't held back by the fact that the color you want isn't available. While it does use water to become flexible, it uses only a little and is ready in seconds, not hours.

This leather offers the artist more possibilities than all of the other leathers combined. The artist can take advantage of the

properties of vegetable tanned leather. They bring possibilities that are impossible in any other material. It is a unique art medium.

Leather comes in different thicknesses

Much leather starts almost as thick as your thumb. Leather that heavy would be hard to use. Another process of interest to the artist is the splitter. The tanner uses a splitting machine to cut the skin into layers. The machine adjusts to cut any thickness needed. (See photo on page 16)

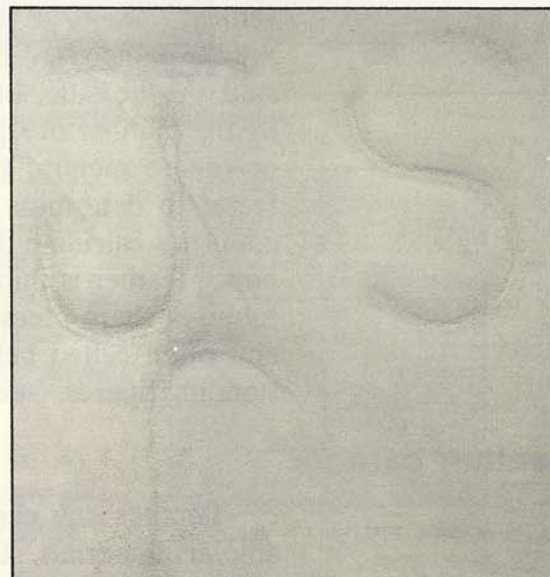
These splits cut from the bottom layers of a skin don't have a top or bottom. They are rough on both sides. Split leather is less expensive than top grain leather. It is usually chrome tanned and coated with paste. The pasted split often has the pattern of another skin pressed on the surface. Usually products advertised as genuine leather come from these splits. Some become suede, having both surfaces roughed up to form a nap. The tanner can sand these same layers like wood and paint it with an acrylic. This makes it look like the top layer of the skin. Top grain leather is the top of the skin. It may be very strong or so thin that it will tear almost like paper. Full grain leather usually comes from a small animal whose skin doesn't need splitting. It is the best quality because no part was cut away. Unsplit leather remains strong, durable, and flexible.

Buying leather

No, you can't buy leather by the roll or by the yard (meter). We can't get animals to grow that way. Special sizes and shapes are expensive because they

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 3 - 4 oz. 3/64 - 4/64" 1.19 - 1.60 mm | Thin leather for small art works. |
| 4 - 5 oz. 4/64 - 5/64" 1.60 - 1.98 mm | Folds easily with some body for strength. |
| 6 - 7 oz. 6/64 - 7/64" 2.39 - 2.78 mm | Ideal for thin straps and small holders. |
| 7 - 8 oz. 7/64 - 8/64" 2.78 - 3.18 mm | Has great strength for holders and straps. |
| 8 - 9 oz. 8/64 - 9/64" 3.18 - 3.58 mm | Strong leather for free standing works. |

Actual size scale of thickness.



Range scars include brands, cuts, and scratches.

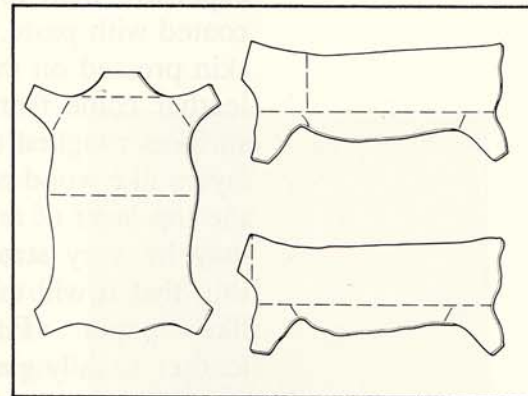
leave the company with so much waste. The cheapest way to buy leather is in much the same form it came from the animal as skins or parts of skins. The edges are irregular and there may even be holes in it. The difference between the best grade and the lowest are the number and type of marks in the skin. Like stone for sculpture, leather has flaws. Animal skin, like yours, carries some history of the animal including scars, brands, and stretch marks. There is considerable difference in price among the grades. You can cut around or include the defects in your design.

Sometimes the lower grades are even more beautiful. Almost twenty years ago, I needed a new briefcase. Because of my occupation, it had to be hand made leather. There was a side we had been unable to sell. It had many scars, and an unusual number of stretch marks. No one looked beyond the surface to the hidden beauty. The finished product was beautiful in it's simplicity (without carving or design). I still carry the same case. In fact, it becomes even more mellow and beautiful with age.

The most common piece of leather is the side. It is half of the entire skin. Each side includes:

- **half the back** (the best leather - is firm, usually clear of range scars)
- **half the belly** (the poorest quality leather - not firm and stretches easily - often uneven thickness)

Not all sides are the same price. Not all steers are the same size. Leather is sold by the side, but priced by the number of square feet or square meters. The other factor to determine the price is thickness. Leather sellers in many countries calculate thickness by the weight of one square foot. Three ounce leather is thin and used for small objects or where your design requires sharp creases. Eight to nine ounce leather is much thicker and often called belt weight. It is useful for larger objects or free standing figures. (see page 21 for metric conversion)



Common leather shapes.

Leather care

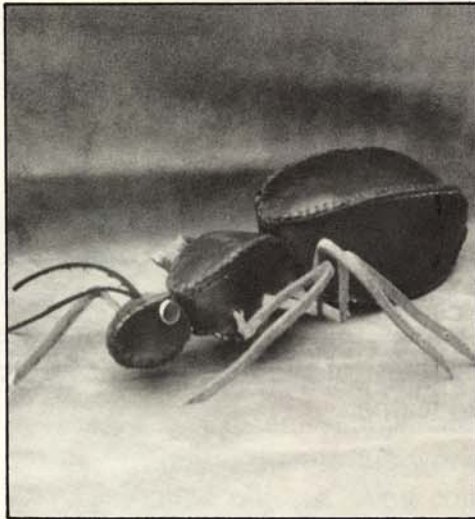
Leather isn't cheap. It costs about the same as many other valuable art materials. Cost is hard to figure. If you use every scrap, the cost can be low. If you waste much of the skin, your finished art

becomes expensive. Another way to keep your costs down is to protect unused leather.

Leather is a long lasting material, IF you protect it from drying. Leather always needs oils in the fibers to keep them soft. If the leather becomes dry, it cracks and loses much of the feel that made it so good to use. Drying comes naturally to all leather. You can do much to protect and preserve both unused skins and finished art. The following enemy list includes dangers which waste leather. They all speed the drying process.

Leather Enemies

- **Sunlight** *Keep all leather out of direct sunlight when possible.*



Insect by Roger Ward.



Elephant, courtesy of Dave Beck.



- **Air** *Leather you want to store should be wrapped in paper until you are ready to use it.*
- **Temperature** *Store leather in a cool dry place. Too much dampness makes a good breeding ground for mold.*

Finished leather should be treated at least twice a year to return oil to the leather. There are many products on the market to preserve leather. Which you use, depends on the type of leather and how it is used. Proper treatment can add hundreds of years to the life of your leather!

Neatsfoot oil is the most famous. It is a good product and works well for leather used outdoors. It wouldn't be the best product for car upholstery you would sit on with white clothes. Some leather conditioners darken the leather. That's fine for an old brief case but not for brightly colored leather clothes. Some work best on old dry leather while others help clean.

Explain your use to your local Tandy store clerk before you buy the wrong product. Don't be afraid to ask questions. They can help you make the choice that's right for your leather.

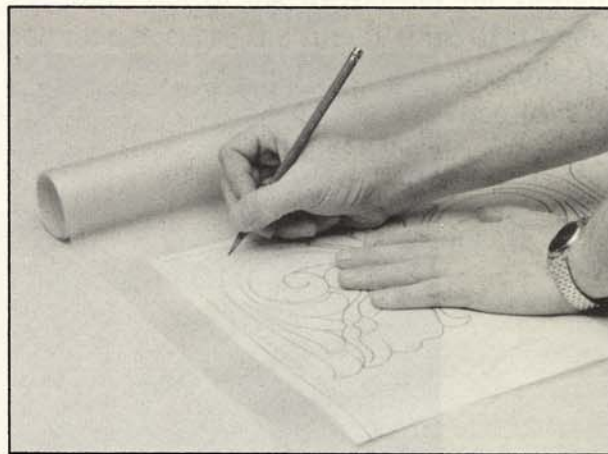
Chapter 3

Cutting and Molding Leather

We introduced vegetable tanned leather in the last chapter. Of all the types of leather available, it holds the most opportunity for the artist. It is easy to mold and shape without special tools or great experience. This leather comes to you without paint, dye, or clear finish. Other than cutting, most of the features in this chapter work best with vegetable tanned leather.

Preparing a pattern

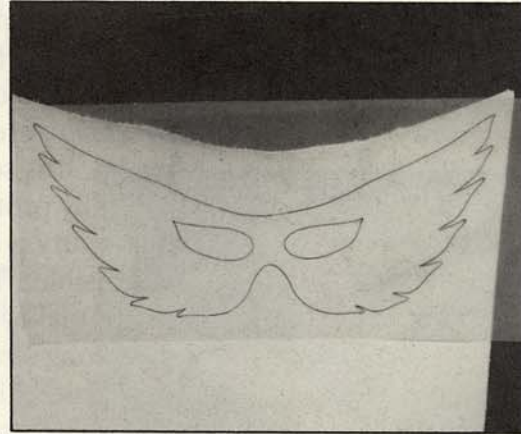
You can mold heavy leather to create a free standing form. The first step is to prepare a cutting pattern. The pattern can be paper, cardboard, or a plastic film. Tandy Leather sells a tracing film that accepts pencil marks. Once designed, you can lay the film on the leather and trace the pattern with a stylus. The impression appears on the leather to aid in cutting. An error with a stylus is correctable, ink or pencil directly on the skin is permanent.



Transfer film lets you copy designs easily.

Cutting Leather

For the person new to working with leather, cutting can seem difficult. It is not! Cutting leather can take a valuable skin and turn it into even more valuable pieces. Some artists do their cutting without patterns. They see the cutting as an extension of the creative process. With practice, they don't use patterns. For most people, a pattern helps prevent mistakes and wasted leather. Cutting can also turn the same skin into expensive scrap. Yes, there are a few rules to help you save money as you cut.

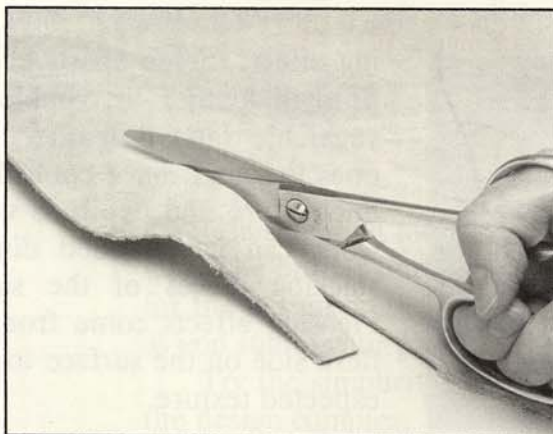


Place patterns on an edge when possible to save leather.

- **Use a pattern** - To use as little leather as possible, design a cutting pattern for your art work.
- **Place your pattern carefully** - Put patterns as close to the edge as possible. Leather is too expensive to cut anything out of the center.
- **Cut all leather dry** - After marking the dimensions, cutting dry makes sharp edges easier to achieve.
- **Use sharp tools** - There are many leather cutting tools available. The best are razor sharp to prevent accidents. That sounds strange doesn't it? A razor sharp knife is much safer than a dull one. A sharp tool requires little effort and reduces

the danger of the blade going in the wrong direction. Dull tools slip easily and you can get blood on the leather.

- **Use shears when possible** - A popular recent addition is leather shears that look like those you use for paper. They are not! Leather shears will cut heavy leather with little effort. They will also take the end of a finger off with equal ease. When used carefully, these shears allow

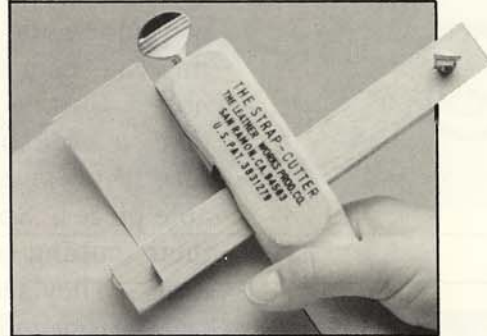


Super Shears can cut even heavy leather easily.

difficult cuts with ease and safety.

- **Use a strap cutter -**

Leather straps are easy with a strap cutter. The one sold by Tandy, uses a razor blade. It is so carefully protected, that injury is almost impossible. The strap cutter makes cutting even long straps an easy task. All the student needs is a straight edge cut on the skin. The strap cutter uses that edge as a guide for the next cut.



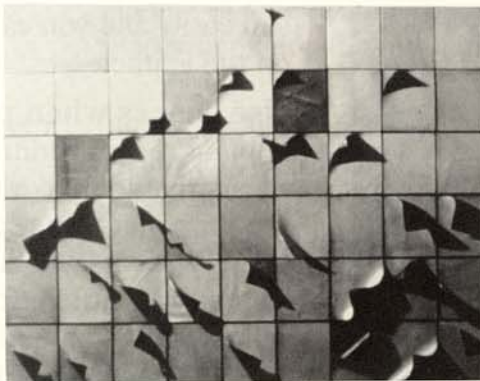
Strap cutters make even strips of many widths.

Collages Alive

Some artists never go beyond this activity. Once they realize the beauty of adding new textures and a third dimension, it keeps them busy for years. They use small pieces of leather to form a collage or image. The various thicknesses, textures, and colors provide a unique and strik-



A collage by Stephanie Wehmeyer.

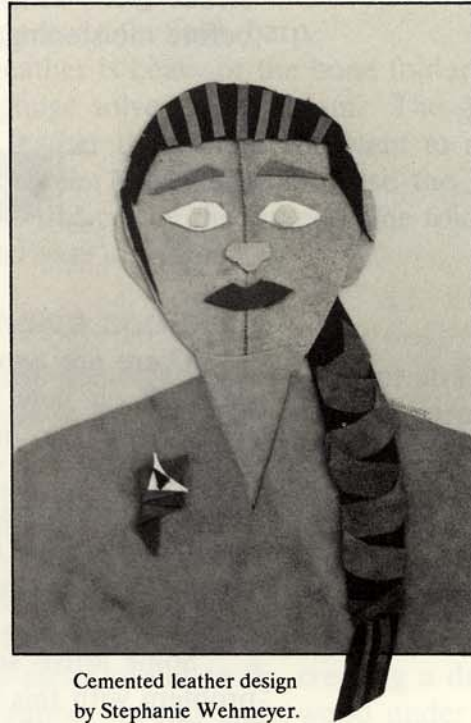


A collage by Marie Potter.

ing effect. Some artists add pieces of finished leather to combine with the vegetable tanned leather. Not only does the artist have control over form but texture and depth as well. A flat work can have added dimension by stacking pieces of the same shape. Pleasing effects come from using the flesh side on the surface to change the expected texture.

Using Glue and Adhesives

Almost any cement will hold pieces of leather together for a collage. If your finished work needs to remain flexible, the type of cement you use is important. Leather cement remains flexible when dry. Most other cement hardens when it dries. When you force the leather to bend, the cement begins to break down. With continued use, the pieces separate. If you plan to attach the leather to a hard surface, almost anything works. If the connection will bend, use a special cement. See Chapter 9 for complete instructions for glueing leather pieces together.



Cemented leather design
by Stephanie Wehmeyer.

Molding Leather

You will remember the first time you mold vegetable tanned leather. It works like no other material you ever used. As you work, ideas flood your mind. You begin to think of what it can let you do. After you cut the piece for your design, you must prepare the leather to mold.

Preparing the leather

Before you try to mold or shape leather, it must be damp. You must use a special liquid: plain water, right from the tap. Moistening leather requires some practice. If the leather becomes too wet or dry, it won't give the desired results. There is some good news. If the leather is too dry, you can wet it some more. If it gets too wet, let it dry. By using the wrong amount of water, you ruin nothing! The worst that can happen, is you may have to wait for the piece to dry. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by trying molding.

Wetting vegetable tanned leather

There are some techniques to help you be successful during your first try. Vegetable tanned leather has two different surfaces. One surface called the grain is smooth. That's where the hair used to be. The other side is the flesh side. That's where the hamburgers and

steaks were attached. You must understand these two surfaces before moistening.

Warning

Once leather is damp, it picks up dirt or oil from your hands. Start with a clean surface to prevent staining the leather. It is easier to keep leather clean than remove stains later.

There are two ways to wet leather for forming. Which you use depends on how much you want the leather to stretch. **Soaking** leather in warm or hot water gains the greatest ability to form over another object. You only need a few seconds in water for thin leather to soak the inside fibers. You may need to soak heavy leather a minute or more to reach all the fibers. The resulting leather is soft and will stretch under pressure. For example, soak leather to mold it over a form.

Some artists soak their leather in very hot or boiling water. The problem with this technique is what happens when the leather dries. The hot water dissolves the oils in the skin. The dry leather becomes hard and may even break if you bend it sharply.

Moistening (but not soaking) leather lets you bend and fold leather. If you use thin leather such as three ounce (thickness) or lighter, you need to moisten the grain side only. If you have leather heavier than three ounces, you need to moisten both sides. Turn it so the flesh or rough side of heavy leather is up first. In that position the grain side is down and still dry. Once damp, don't place the grain side down or you could pick up dirt. Dip a sponge in plain tap water. Squeeze it enough to remove much of the water. It shouldn't drip over the surface, even if you lightly shake the sponge.

Moisten the entire surface with the sponge. Don't apply so much water that it stands on the surface. The goal is to get the leather damp, not wet. Turn the leather over and moisten the grain side. Allow the leather to stand for a moment or two to absorb the water and let the fibers expand. If the inner fibers are not damp, you will never mold a piece of leather. It is not the

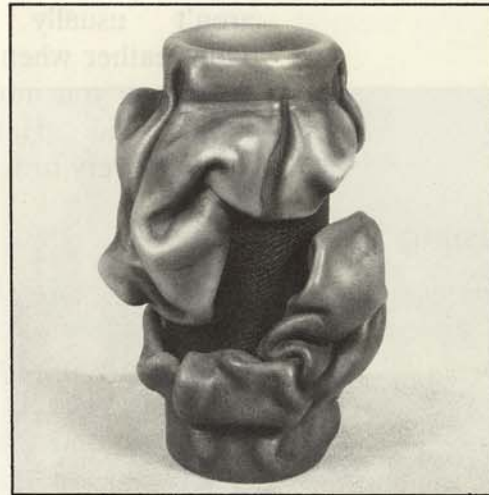


Leather mask by John Adams.

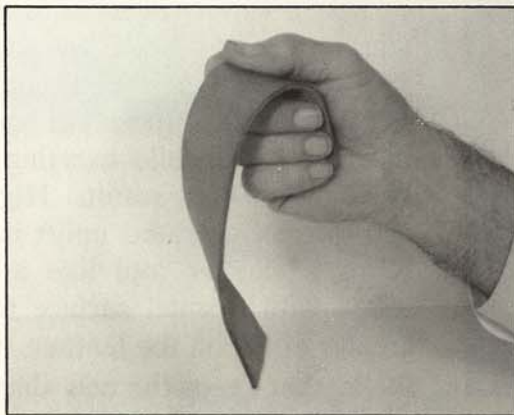
outer fibers that are the most important.

Testing for moisture (not soaked leather)

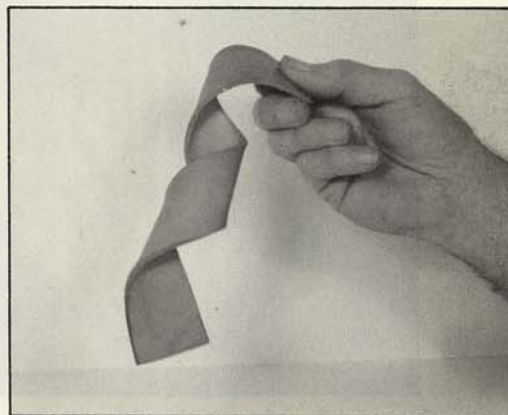
Practice is the only way to know if the water content is perfect for molding. There are some features you can look for. The surface should be darker and more mottled in appearance than dry leather. If it becomes a uniform (even) dark color, you used too much water. When the surface **BEGINS** to return to the original color, it is ready for molding.



Molded leather creates a drape effect by John Corey.



If leather is too wet it will be limp and won't hold a shape.



With correct moisture level the leather will keep the shape you give it.



Mask and plaster mold by Les Williams.

Let's say you have a leather strap several inches long and about the same width as a belt. When the leather is dry, bend it 90 degrees. Let go of one end. It should snap back to the original shape. If you apply the correct amount of water, the bend remains when you let go. Soaked leather droops like a wet noodle. Any bends in damp leather remain permanent **ONLY** when you allow the leather to dry. Properly dampened leather holds whatever shape you want. Clamps, ties, and supports

aren't usually necessary. Thin leather when dry, keeps the shape you molded but it is not rigid. Heavy leather becomes very firm and rigid.

Shaping Leather

Once the leather is damp, wonderful changes are possible. Imagine leather folded as a drape to serve as a background for another medium. Not only will the leather accept folds, we can raise sections from behind. Pressure applied to the back



A modeling tool used from the back to increase depth.

of damp leather makes it stretch and adds a third dimension to the art. You can use a variety of tools to get the effect you want. Let's say you want to form a large gentle bubble on the grain surface. Rubbing with a spoon from the flesh side while exerting pressure, gives the desired result. Higher relief or more exaggerated uplift is possible. Using a smaller tool like a modeling spoon with a small surface area has a greater effect on the leather. Once dry, the leather keeps the new shape.

You may dampen a piece of leather several times during shaping. As the leather begins to dry, it resists your tries at molding and shaping. When this begins to happen, you can wet only the area you are working with. Leather must be damp before you can easily change the shape. You can let your leather air dry, dry it with a hair dryer, or even an oven. The method you choose determines the outcome. If you allow it to dry naturally, the finished product is much like it was before moistening. Using a hair dryer makes the finished product much more stiff than before. Oven drying provides a hard inflexible finished product that may even break if dropped.



A modeling tool lets you add detail to your work.

of damp leather makes it stretch and adds a third dimension to the art. You can use a variety of tools to get the effect you want. Let's say you want to form a large gentle bubble on the grain surface. Rubbing with a spoon from the flesh side while exerting pressure, gives the desired result. Higher relief or more exaggerated uplift is possible. Using a smaller tool like a modeling spoon with a small surface area has a greater effect on the leather. Once dry, the leather keeps the new shape.

You may dampen a piece of leather several times during shaping.

Mask Making

Many artists find mask making a challenging and rewarding activity. There is no wrong way to make masks. The examples here use a light weight three ounce leather. You can force leather to assume a shape of another object or form a new one. The



Mask molded over a form by Tony Laier.

patience as you stretch the leather slowly until it takes the form of the covered object. You need more water for high relief efforts than for leather folds. While this technique will work with almost any thickness, it is



Free form leather mask by Harry Moore.

artist can form moist leather over some form such as the masks on the right and below. Our examples illustrate one mask formed over an old wooden African mask and one over a store manikin. It takes time and force to bring out all the detail.

Using a modeling spoon on the grain side stretches the leather to take a new shape. Relief this high takes considerable



Adding feathers adds to the molded mask.
Courtesy of Fred Eisen.

much easier to work with leather no heavier than three ounce.

Lighter weight leather is easier to fold and accepts the fine detail required by a mask. Once you have the general shape and form, you are only at the beginning. Masks let artists use all of their skills. You can give your mask detail by using a stylus on the DAMP surface.

Cut a piece of leather large enough to include the detail you want to display. Make any cuts which

prevent you from forming the mask. Don't worry about openings for the eyes or mouth. It is easier to add them later when the mask is dry.

On a flat table, moisten the leather and give it about a minute for the fibers to expand. Make the first major folds and get them into position. It isn't practical to use a sponge if your unfinished mask begins to dry. A light spray of water lets you add a little water at a time. Be careful to moisten the entire surface. Leather darkens just a little each time you apply water. If you only wet one section, the water mark will remain after the leather dries.



Airbrush to add color highlights.



A preval sprayer lets you dye leather quickly.

Adding color to your mask

Once the mask dries, it's time for finishing. If you want to keep the natural color, you can consider adding other materials for decoration. Feathers, lace, and beads make an outstanding statement. They add different textures as well as color.

If you decide to add color, you have many choices available. Dyes are more subtle and give the appearance of age to your work. Leather paints open the world of bright colors for a brilliant display. You can apply paints or dye with an airbrush or use a fine brush for detail.

Finish for your mask

Once you complete your art object, see the chapter on dying and finishing leather. Vegetable tanned leather needs a finish as a minimum. The finish protects the surface and prevents drying.

Sculpture

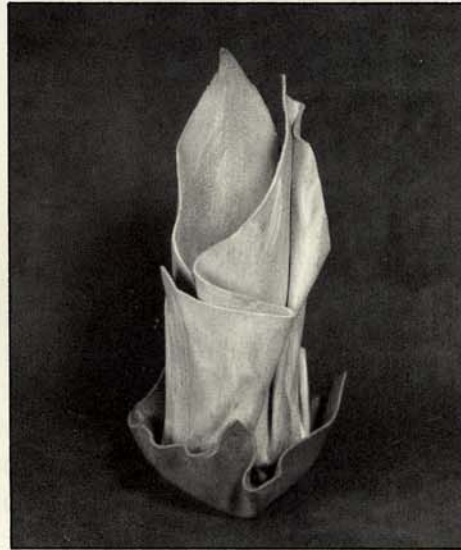
There is even more possible! The artist's imagination is the only limiting factor in cutting, folding, molding, and shaping vegetable tanned leather. Free standing sculpture is one of the possibilities. Making sculpture is similar to mask construction. The difference is thickness. You need more water and a little more time for the fibers to expand. The heavier the leather, the more difficult it is to bend and shape. Once you finish, heavy leather provides a striking finished product.

Cutting a pattern isn't a problem. Sharp knives, leather shears, and strap cutters cut heavy leather too. There is an additional step we ignored with masks. What do we do with the cut edge?

Edges of most masks are so thin, they don't draw the viewer's eye. Heavy leather leaves a raw visible edge. No, it isn't going to fray like canvas. The edge may look unfinished if your work has much detail. There are several possibilities. You could dye the edge a contrasting color. Some artists like to round the edge while others fold it to hide the cut. See the edge tools described in Chapter 6.

You might consider attaching your leather art to another surface. Leather fastened to wood opens two sculpture techniques. The wood makes the leather sculpture more rigid. The other possibility is adding detail through leather to the wood sculpture.

Vegetable tanned leather with a few simple tools allows the creative spirit to run wild. The unrivaled qualities of the leather make it a favorite for the artist.



A free standing sculpture by Harry Moore.

Chapter 4

Leather as Icing

A cake needs icing to bring it to its full glory. Leather adds the icing to many art forms. Creative artists are rediscovering an old idea. In early history, artists often used leather to increase the value of their art. Art objects of many materials had leather added to bring out the beauty of the work. Some of today's artists are finding new and exciting ways to do the same.

There are no limits to the blends of leather and other materials. Artists try combinations with leather because of what it brings to the work. Leather in combination with wood, metal, canvas, ceramics, and stone are just some possibilities.

Wood



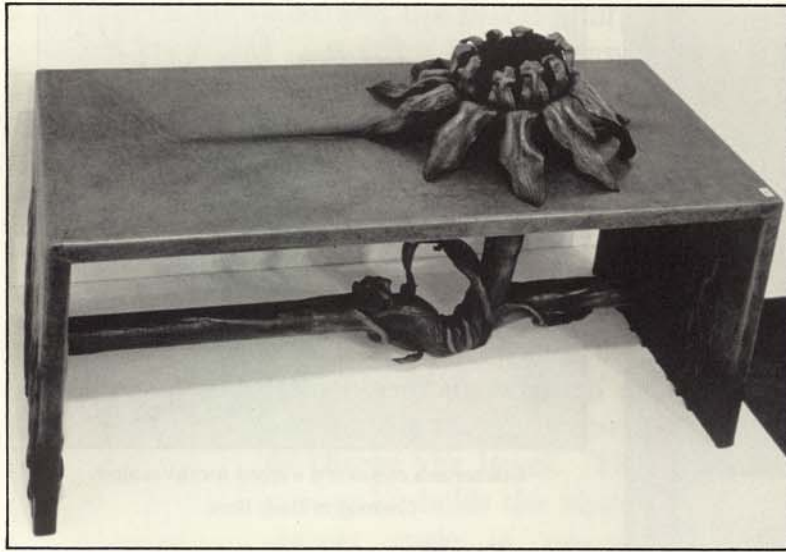
Wood and leather complement each other.
Courtesy of Dave Beck

Wood provides stability while leather brings warmth and softness to designs. Stained wood and dyed leather appear to blend because both finishes sink into the surface. Some artists use leather as inlay just as they would a contrasting wood.

Inlaying means that you must cut into the wood. You remove wood to the same depth of the thickness of the leather. The leather shape and cut area must match exactly. There are several ways to attach them together. Chapter 9 explains the choices in detail.

Some artists prefer to use the leather as a surface covering. It can cover the entire work or highlight an area. The leather can add another dimension to a flat surface. The design can appear as leather pieces using the wood as a canvas.

There is another way of using leather with wood that takes advantage of the abilities of thin damp



The wooden table holds the leather abstract in place.

Courtesy of Grant Finch

vegetable tanned leather. You can mold leather over the wood as a skin. It makes a finished piece with no seams to see unless the viewer turns the object over. Once the molded leather is dry, you can cement it to the wood.

Metal

The hard surface of metal brings the ultimate contrast to leather. The smooth nonporous rigid surface of metal limits the artist. The soft, mellow, and

flexible leather lets the artist go beyond metal's limits.

Sometimes, leather acts as a connecting material to join metal pieces together. The flexibility of the leather lets the artist free the rigid metal pieces to let them move. Joining leather and metal isn't new. Their differences make the combination useful to both. From a knight's armor in the Middle Ages to modern mobiles, leather and metal make a good team.



Wood makes an interesting frame for painted leather art.

Courtesy of Dave Beck.



Bark and leather together by Grant Finch.



Ceramics and suede by Bill J. Harrison.



Leather as a canvas sets a mood for the subject.

Courtesy of Dave Beck

Canvas

Any flat painting surface limits the artist to two dimensions. Leather lets the artist easily add the third dimension. The collage discussed in Chapter 7 provides an opportunity for this union.

Remember how well leather accepts acrylics. Cut part of your design from leather and cement it to the canvas. As the painting begins, the same paint can go from the canvas to the leather. Adding several layers of the same shape make even more relief possible.

Ceramics

Leather and ceramics are a natural mixture. The contrast between materials is much like combining leather with metal. The blend is a contrast of textures and features.

Once the ceramics are fired, leather can add to the design process. Small pieces of colored suede cemented to the surface as a mosaic complement the ceramic. Like painting, the

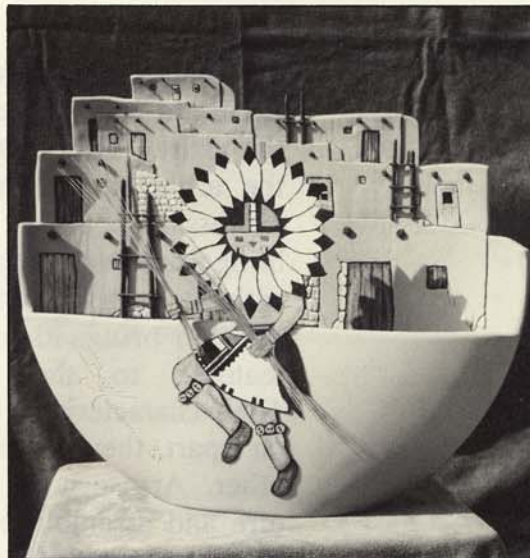


Ceramics and suede by Bill J. Harrison.

process is simple. Like sculpture, bringing the art to perfection can take many years.

Inlaid suede and ceramics begin with an original design. While the ceramic is still green, carve a design into the surface. After firing, cut small pieces of suede to complete the mosaic suede design. Lay the leather piece by piece into the carved depression.

The effect is dramatic! Fine quality suede has a soft sensual warmth. When you combine it with the hard cold ceramic surface the result is exciting. Running your hand across the finished work brings another dimension to the ceramic art.

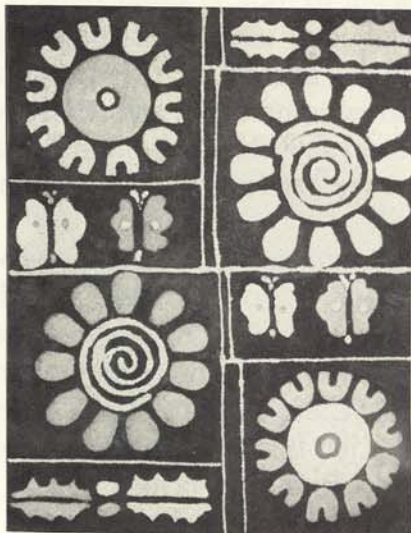


Ceramics and suede by Bill J. Harrison.



Ceramics and suede by Bill J. Harrison.

Sand



Glue, sand and suede make an interesting combination by Geri Greenman.

Suede in particular, makes an excellent background for sand painting. The technique is the same for leather as paper. The contrast of surfaces between the sand and the leather adds a richness to the work. This same effect is impossible to get with paper. It just happens when leather is the background. Using suede or leather turns an interesting activity into a valuable piece of art.

Stone

Metal, ceramics, and stone are cold surfaces for the artist. They challenge the artist and often limit expression. Some artists bring warmth to their work without other materials. Leather brings its unique features to the stone. Their characteristics are so far apart, they flatter each other. Art such as sculpture and assemblages provide opportunities for use.



The warmth of leather works well with cold stone in jewelry by Larry Verret.

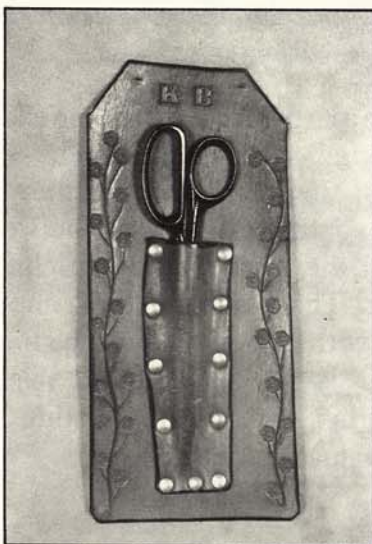
Product design

Some people see commercial art as the most important art form. Their belief is that people only get to see paintings and sculpture occasionally. Commercial art including product design surrounds us all day long. This didn't impress me too much until recently. The change came while speaking to someone from a country just freed from almost half a century of communism. This person told me that in the United States, even lawn mowers are beautiful. In their country they were square, painted with dull colors, and had no style. Who looks at a lawn mower as an art object?

This talk had made me begin to look at other objects a different way. People do use their talent and knowledge of art to make common objects beautiful. This shouldn't surprise anyone. Art began as commercial art. Early people used design to make everyday objects beautiful thousands of years before someone made art for the sake of beauty alone.

Leather had an important part in this process in the past and still does today. For example, my wife loves to sew. She has a pair of shears no one can touch except her. She values them more than many other objects around the house. Where are they? In a leather case designed with vines and flowers. The case protects them, makes them easy to find, and brings beauty to a plain uninteresting object.

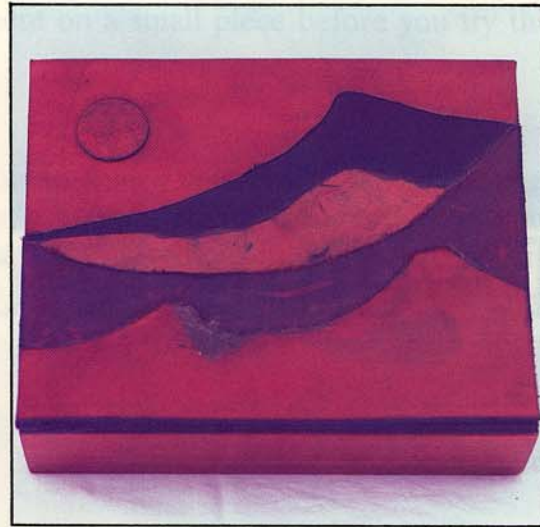
A number of years ago, the President of the United States wanted to put on a Bar-B-Que in Paris for world leaders. The White House Staff got the best chefs for the



Scissor holder by Mike Trembly.

meal. They wanted everything to look and work as well as possible. No detail was overlooked. The staff also went to a leather artist to design a case for the carving tools. Was that leather case a piece of art? Had the dinner been inside, would a painting on the wall, painted for the occasion, been art? Do you see a difference?

Leather has always been a popular material for cases to hold objects or materials. There are old leather wine bottles still existing today. The knife sheath is common, but how about a sword? Can these cases be art? What can the artist do to make a plain case art?



Leather covered box by Amy Newby, New Zealand.



Leather carving in North America dates back to Spanish explorers.



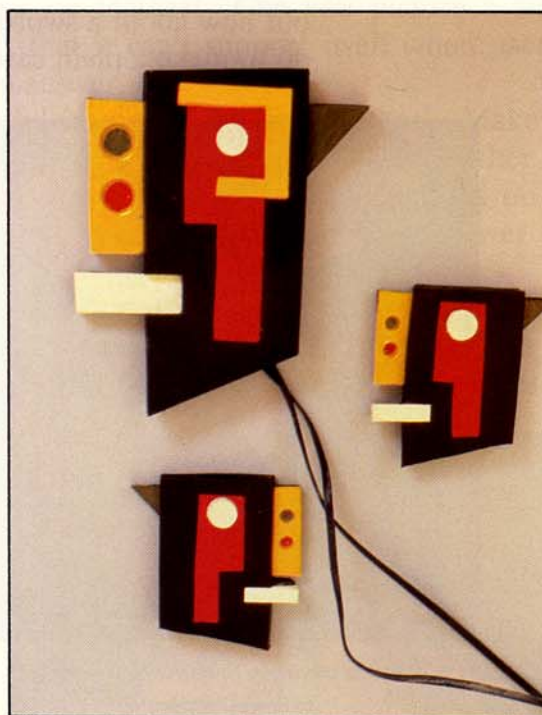
Leather vase by Paul Williams.

Chapter 5

Dyeing and Finishing Leather

Coloring leather is not like painting on a canvas. Once a canvas is in the frame, it doesn't bend. As you bend leather, many paints and finishes crack unless you use those designed to bend with the leather. This chapter covers the possibilities you might want to use. After the basics, we will cover how to use each product alone and in combination.

Once you complete your art object, you have a decision to make. There are three possibilities to choose from. You can leave your leather with a natural color, dye, or paint it. You can get traditional dark shades or let your imagination go wild. Yes, bright colors are available too. Each way of coloring or finishing leather has advantages and limitations. Let's look at them.



Jewelry by Marie Potter, New Zealand

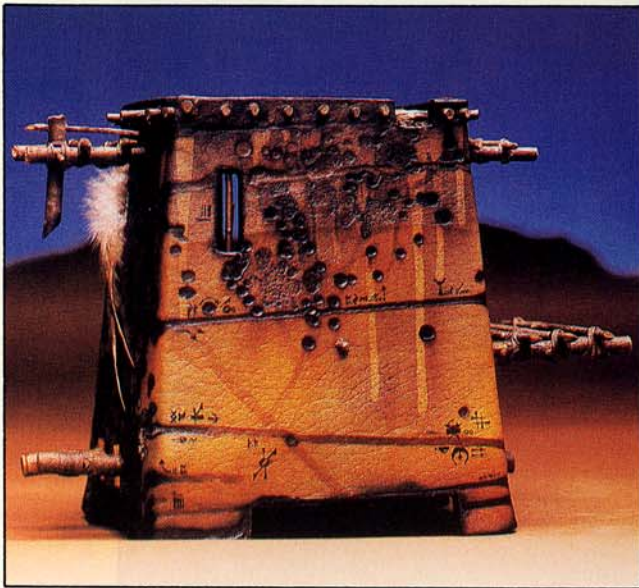
Natural Finish

Some think that the most beautiful leather art is natural. For example, instead of dye they use feathers to add color and highlights. Brightly colored beads stand out well against natural leather. Some artists use natural leather accented with colored suede. There are hundreds of ways to display your creativity.

Just what color natural is, depends on what you did to the leather. Vegetable tanned leather changes color. It begins as a light tan about the color of a manila file folder. Each time you wet the leather it gets just a little darker. If you wet leather once while you work on it, the natural color is different than if you wet it six times.



Adding feathers makes your work exciting. (Fred Eisner)



Spirit Trap "EHWAZ" by Ian White, Australia



Part natural leather and part dyed.
Marie Potter, New Zealand



Layered leather cut into a fanciful shape
by Roz Short.



Audry II by Diane Corey

Some instructions tell you to bleach leather to remove unwanted stains from handling. That sounds good, and it is until you dye your leather. Sometimes the dye reacts with the bleach to give you an unexpected color. Brown dye may turn green or yellow on all or part of your design. Keep your leather clean and leave the bleach to others. If your work is too dirty, black is always a useful color.

If you leave leather out in the air, it begins to oxidize (mix with oxygen) and gets darker. If you put natural leather in sunlight for a few hours, it gets much darker. Left in the sun long enough, it



Leather mask courtesy of Association of
New Zealand Leatherworkers.

turns brown and gets very tough and hard. Too much direct sunlight also dries the leather and makes cracks when bending.

Even if you want to keep the natural color, it's still necessary to apply a clear finish. See *FINISHES* later in this chapter.

Dye & Stain

Leather dye sinks into the fibers. It gives a permanent color to your work. Even if you scratch the leather later, the dye shows through because it isn't just on the surface. You don't get a true color with a dye.



Award winning design by James I. Durham.



Metal & Leather Grasshopper by Stephanie Rothmond, Germany



Fly mask by John Corey.

After you apply the dye, you get a combination of colors. The color is a combination of the natural color of the leather and the color in the dye. Because of this, dye colors are subtle.

Picture a piece of sanded wood. If you stain wood, the finish is much different from paint. The colors are mellow and you can see

the grain through the stain. Replace the word "wood" with "leather" and "stain" with "dye." This should help you understand dyed leather. As you can imagine, most available colors are shades of browns, reds, and light yellow.

Dye is also good if you want to change the color of fingers, table tops, and clothes. Protect your hands with plastic or rubber gloves, cover your table, and wear old clothes when applying dye. Washing your hands after dyeing helps, but some color will have to wear off.

Spirit dye

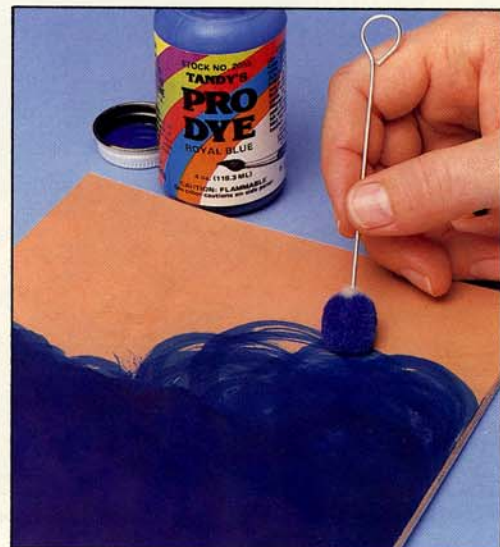
Any spirit dye contains a liquid like alcohol. It dissolves the pigment and carries it with this thin liquid. Spirit dyes that evaporate quickly can be a real advantage. Apply spirit dye to dry leather. It absorbs the liquid like a sponge and carries the color into the fibers. This is the best dye if you want a solid color.

Applying Spirit Dye

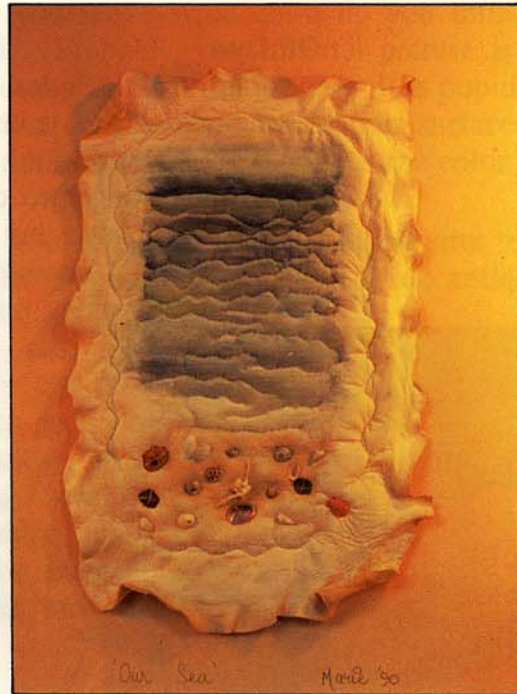
There are many ways to apply any Spirit dye. You can apply it to large areas with a wool dauber, a brush, or an airbrush. If you want to dye the piece a single color, use a circular motion with the dauber. A small brush lets you reach small areas. Use a solvent to clean your brushes.



An airbrush lets you easily dye and shade large areas.



Use a dauber for dyeing large areas.



Stitched and dyed wall hangings by Marie Potter, New Zealand

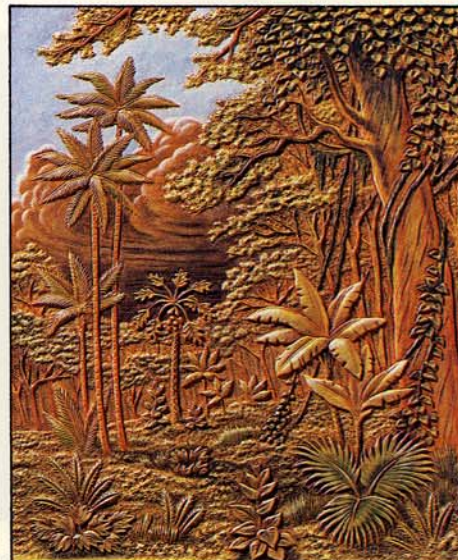
In seconds, the dye is dry and you are ready to remove excess pigment on the surface. Buff the surface with wool scraps or a soft cloth. The finish appears as a luster rather than a high shine.

There is a problem with spirit dye. The alcohol in the dye dissolves some of the oils in the leather. As the alcohol evaporates, it takes some of these oils with it. You might need to use a product like Lexol to replace those oils if the leather will get hard use.



Warning -

Alcohol based dyes release fumes into the air. Be careful there is no open flame or spark these fumes can reach. When using any solvent dye, be sure there is good ventilation in the room. Don't use this dye in a small closed area.



Pictorial carving by Al Stohman.

Oil Dye

This dye includes an oil to soften the leather for better penetration. It takes much longer to dry than a spirit dye but a finish isn't necessary when you complete your work.

Because of the oil, you don't have much of a choice of colors. Black and shades of brown are your only choices. Other colors would blend with the oil and do not give pleasing results.

Spectra shade blending dye

This nonflammable dye has the pigment suspended in water. It works much like the spirit dyes but lacks the strength of color. These pastel colors penetrate the fibers like the spirit dye. Since the dissolved pigment is in water, there aren't strong vapors in the air and it's not flammable.

Applying Spectra Shade Dye

There are many ways to apply this dye. You can apply it to large areas with a wool dauber, or an airbrush. A small brush helps with hard to reach areas. Clean your brushes with plain water.



Antiques add a richness to your art by Linda Sue Bergfeld.



Design by Marie Potter, New Zealand.

Antique stain

Antiques come in liquid or paste forms. The dissolved pigment is in water. As the name says, it makes new leather look old. Antiques sometimes leave streaks and dark areas that give instant age to your work. It's a dye that you rub into the surface. It penetrates the leather but not as deeply as a spirit dye. Antique comes in black and shades of brown.

Does the word leather create a picture in your mind? Close your eyes and think

about leather. What do you see? What color do you think about when you hear the word? Probably, your mental picture is brown leather with a finish like one possible with antique. It is popular with artists who use tools to stamp designs into the leather surface. They like the way it sinks into the tool prints. This makes the color deeper in them than other dyes.

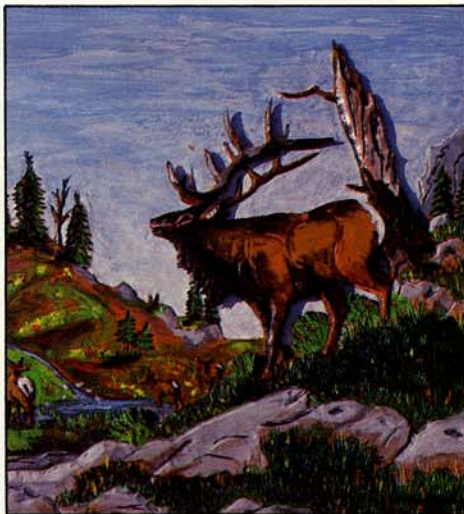
Applying Antique - If your antique is a liquid, be sure to shake it before using. With a damp sponge or wool scrap, rub antique into the leather. As you finish, use a damp sponge or paper towel to gently wipe off the excess. Let it dry and use a clean scrap of wool and buff the surface. What remains is a deep color and a high luster. If the color isn't dark enough, repeat the process.



Apply antique with a wool scrap or paper towel.

Paint

Painting leather is different from all the dyes and stains we discussed so far. Paint is opaque and covers the grain of the leather. It attaches itself to the surface and doesn't penetrate. Paints let the artist choose from a wide range of colors.



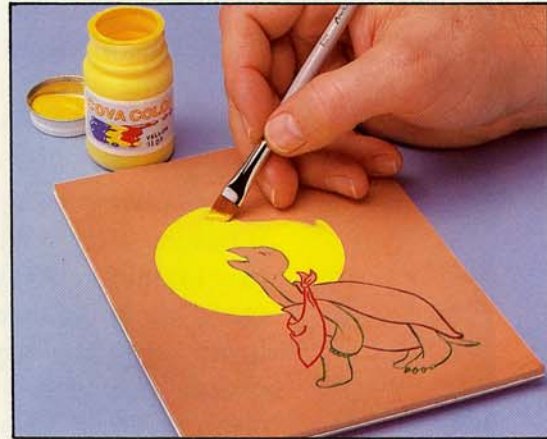
Courtesy of Dave Beck

Cova Color

This water based acrylic paint allows you excellent coverage with a single coat. It bends with your leather and small areas won't crack or peel off the flexible leather. Large areas may crack with repeated bending like the fold of a billfold. It bends many times a day as you open it and the Cova may crack at the bend. Cova mixes easily to give combinations of colors for your designs. It can add bright colors to highlight art work when used in combination with dyes.

Applying Cova Color

Be sure to shake the bottle well before you use it. Apply Cova with a brush as you would any other acrylic paint. Be sure to use a scrap of leather to remove much of the paint before you start painting your design. After drying, a bright color with a high luster remains. Clean your brushes with plain water.



Paint markers

These look like a marker and paint like a brush. They let you get into hard to reach places and leave a solid color finish. Most felt markers dye leather like spirit or spectra shade dyes. They penetrate the fibers, while paint markers lay paint on the surface.



Finishes

All vegetable tanned leather needs a finish. It's to protect the leather from water, oil from your hands, and dirt. While you can't make leather waterproof, it can become water resistant.

As leather gets older, the oils in the skin evaporate. If you allow this to continue, dry leather cracks when you bend it. Leather needs occasional treatment to keep it soft and flexible.



Figures courtesy of John & Nancy Bailey.

Finishes slow this drying process. They don't protect the leather forever. Finishes do allow you to treat leather less often.

The dye you use limits your choice of a finish. Some dyes and finishes don't go well together. You can ruin your work with the wrong combination.

Super Shene

This finish helps seal and protect your finished work. It works with all dyes, stains, and paints. Super Shene is a clear, water repellent, acrylic finish. If you aren't sure which finish to use, it's the perfect choice.



Markers make using color easy to use with your art.

Applying Super Shene

Be sure to shake the bottle well before you use it. Apply Super Shene with a piece of wool scrap or dauber. Wipe it on evenly. It's not necessary to rub this into the leather. In fact you can cause problems if you rub too much. Super Shene forms bubbles with rubbing that can make a spotted finish when dry. You will notice that some color comes off on your dauber if you apply Super Shene over antique. Don't worry, that's normal and won't affect the color of your work. When allowed to dry, Super Shene leaves a smooth luster.



Leather apple by Roger Ward



Wall hanging by Marie Potter, New Zealand

Neat Lac

This finish is a lacquer for leather. Neat Lac gives you the strongest and most water resistant finish. Use it only with penetrating dyes. Neat Lac does not work well with acrylics. It can dissolve and ruin the acrylic paint. If you didn't dye your art, Neat Lac is also the best finish for natural leather. It comes in liquid form or in a spray can.

Applying Neat Lac

Apply Neat Lac with a wool scrap. Work it well into the leather. Rub Neat Lac until the pad is dry. It dries quickly on the leather to a strong high gloss finish. You can spray Neat Lac to protect hard to reach areas of delicate sculpture.



Garment leathers come already dyed from the tannery.



Freeform sculpture by Marie Potter



The bowl is made from tiny pieces of leather mixed with glue and formed into shape.



Warning - Neat Lac releases fumes into the air. When using this finish, be sure there is good ventilation in the room. Don't use it in a small closed area.

Dyeing Rules

Think before you dye. For example, will there be holes in your piece of art? If so, do you want the edges of the holes dyed or kept natural? If you want the edges dyed, cut them before you apply dye. If you want the edges natural, cut holes after dyeing. If you follow a few simple rules, you can dye leather beautifully the first time.

Dyeing Hints

- Check the shade of dye on a scrap of leather that came from the same skin as your art if possible. Penetrating dyes work differently with each skin. A dye that might appear dark with one skin might be light with another.
- Have a good supply of wool pieces available. They work better than a soft



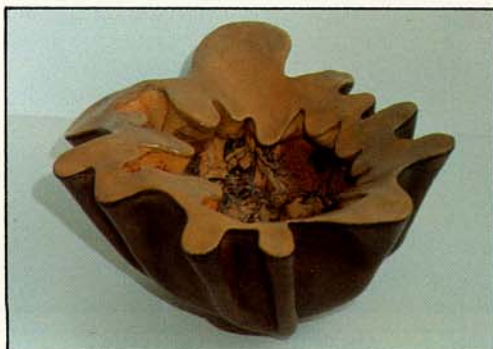
Leather and wood by Jackie Wunderle



Butterfly by Lill Kaden



Leather combined with bone for an interesting effect.



Bowl courtesy of New Zealand Leatherworkers

- cloth to remove excess pigment.
- Use the lightest color first, and the darkest last if using several colors.
- Use more than one coat to darken the color.
- If a little dye is good, a lot of dye **isn't** always better.
- Wipe your brush or dauber on the edge of the bottle before you begin.
- Touch the brush or dauber to a piece of scrap leather first to remove excess dye before you apply dye to your work.
- Don't rush your work. Let the dye dry between colors.
- Let dye dry before you apply finish.
- Keep in mind that penetrating dye fades more than acrylics with age.
- Cover the table where you work with cardboard or newspaper.

- Protect your hands with plastic or rubber gloves.
- Wear a smock, apron, or old clothes to protect your good ones.
- Place dye bottles so that you don't drip dye across your project.

Resist magic

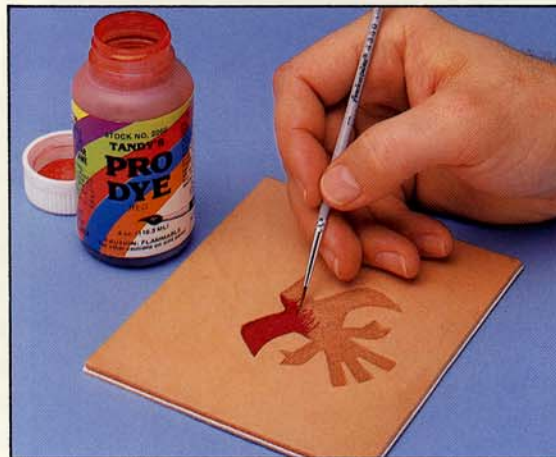
Yes, this is magic. You can spread antique with a wool pad and leave incredible detail. The trick is that antique doesn't have much effect on a finish. If you select an area to remain natural, brush it with a finish before using the antique. After the finish dries, apply the antique. The finished area remains free from the antique while the rest of the leather picks up the mellow antique color.



A resist lets you protect areas from water based dyes and antiques.

Dyeing a silhouette

Let's say your art work includes a silhouette stamped into the leather. You might consider brushing a dark spirit dye into the tool prints. This contrasting color makes the tooled area stand out from the background. You need to be careful when you get close to the edge. If your brush holds too much dye, it can bleed up the edge and on to the surface. Start in the center of any area you want to dye and work to the edge when your brush is almost dry. Move your leather often to keep a



Use dye to create a silhouette.

edge when your brush is almost dry. Move your leather often to keep a good brush angle. Experiment on a small piece before you try this with a major work.

Block Dyeing

If you used stamping tools to design your work, you might consider contrasting colors. Let's say you stamped a border on your leather. You want the tool marks to stand out in yellow but the surface dark brown. Your first thought is hours of painting each tool



Block dyeing helps make tool prints stand out.

print. That's not what you have to do. You can get this result in a few moments.

Use a dauber and a light color penetrating dye for the tool prints. You don't have to be neat. Don't worry if some or a lot of dye gets on the surface. It doesn't matter at this point, what happens to the surface. We will cover any dye outside of the tool prints later. Once the dye dries, find a small piece of dry sponge or wood block. Wrap it with a fine-weave cloth like that in "T" shirts to make a dye block. Apply some dark brown penetrating dye to the block and then lightly rub it over the surface. The brown covers any yellow on the surface. Since the sponge is hard, it doesn't force the



Antiqued leather

brown dye into the tool prints. Each tool print stands out and looks like you spent hours to get that effect.

Consider using your block to dye just around outer edges. Rub the edges with an almost dry block. You can control the darkness of color as you reach the center of your work. Block dyeing doesn't give a uniform color. It does create striking effects on edges.

Black Dye

You might wonder why we have an entire section for black. Believe it or not, it's hard to dye leather black with a spirit dye. When you try, the color often appears more like slate color than black. What you see is a combination of the natural leather color and the dye. To get a good true black, dye your work three times. Dye your work black, then blue or green, then black again. This technique gives a good, deep, black.

Leather as dye

Yes, I do mean leather on leather! Can you picture a suede sculpture? Suede is so soft that it can't support itself when used in sculpture form. There is an answer.

Remember the wonderful feature of molding leather? Make the basic form of the sculpture using heavy vegetable tanned leather and let it dry. Once the form is rigid, cement the suede pieces on the frame. When the artist covers every part of the base, the viewer sees an impossible suede sculpture.

For some work, it's a good idea to dye the vegetable tanned leather a dark color before adding suede. One artist soaks the leather in dye to guarantee good dye penetration. Soaking has the added advantage of making the leather more stiff as it dries. Baking the leather in an oven or in hot sunshine also hardens it. Be careful not to bake it too much. If you do, the leather becomes too brittle and will break if you try to bend it.



Heavy leather supplies the support for soft suede in this work by Bill J. Harrison.

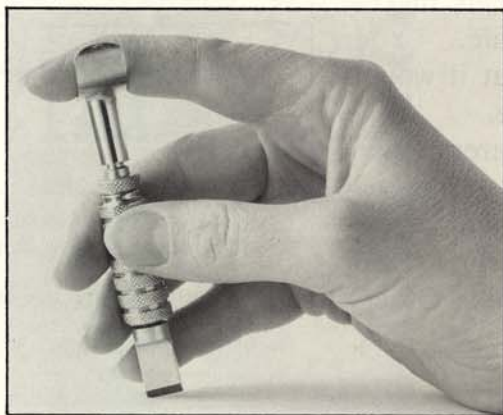
Chapter 6

Tools for Design and Control

Tools let the artist get the most from whatever kind of leather you use. Like choosing the right brush, the right tool makes your work easier. It also makes the finished product look better. This chapter lets you look for the tool to get the effect you want. Each section pictures and describes tools to help you. Be sure to read carefully to see if the leather should be wet or dry for each tool.

Cutting Lines

One joy of working with vegetable tanned leather is that you can add depth to your art. This is a different



Hold a swivel knife on an angle.



A swivel knife turns to let you cut designs.

method from folding or forcing the leather from the back. Carved leather is usually an illusion. It **LOOKS** like you raised part of the design. You press down the edges of the outline to make the design look raised.

Using a swivel knife

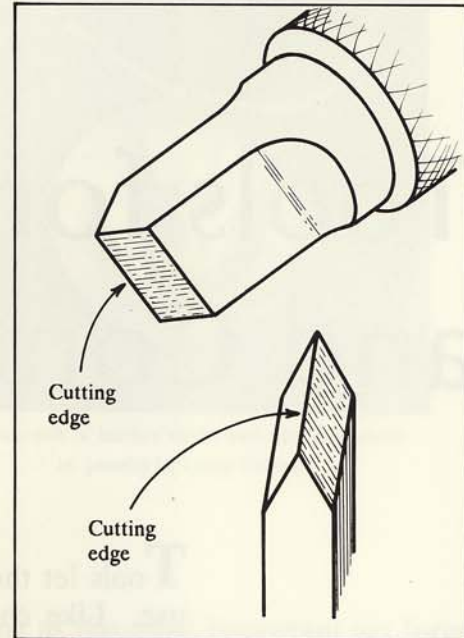
Cutting lines in **DAMP** (slightly moistened) leather where you want to add another dimension is the first step. Instead of using a brush, you cut the edges of your design. The tool used for making these cuts is a swivel knife. It takes a little practice to master, but it's worth it.

How deep do you cut?

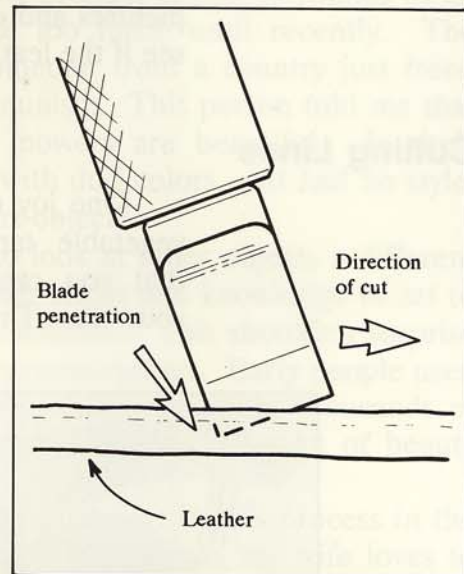
A swivel knife turns in your hand. You direct the cutting edge with your thumb and second finger. You apply pressure with your first finger to control the depth of the cut. To get the most effect, cut as deeply as possible. You should try to cut at least one third of the way through the leather. That sounds easy, but it takes practice to cut deeply enough.

You don't have to worry about cutting too deep unless the leather is very thin. A swivel knife has a sharp blade but a wide bevel. This makes the blade almost safe. You could cut yourself, but it would take time and practice.

There are different size blades available for a swivel knife. Some are thin and have a fine cutting edge for sharp corners and fine detail. Others are wide and help keep long lines straight.



Swivel knife blades have a wide bevel.



Swivel knife cuts go about half way through the leather

Others are wide and help keep long lines straight.

Keeping the blade sharp

A sharp blade is easy to use and makes clean cuts. A dull one tears through the leather and often leaves rough torn edges. It's also difficult to make cuts deep enough with a dull blade.

If the blade gets chipped or very dull, use a sharpening kit and stone to restore the edge. It's possible to sharpen a blade without the kit but be careful not to change the bevel. The sharpening kit holds the blade at the correct angle as you draw it across a stone.

The best blades are ceramic and don't need sharpening. All blades need care and preparation.

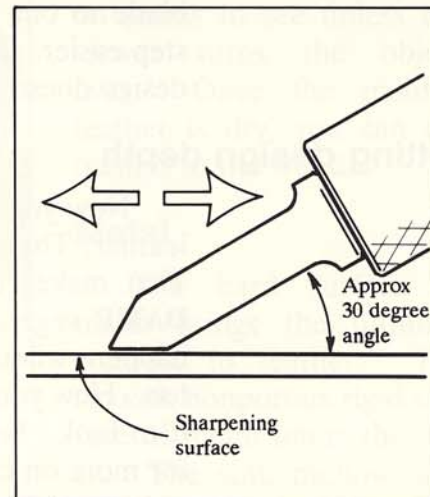
It's easier to keep a blade sharp than sharpen one. Before you make your first cut, strop the blade. Does this sound like the barber who strops a razor before using it? Yes, it's the same. Stropping polishes the blade to make it cut easier. You don't need a long strop like the barber.

All you need is a strip of leather about the same width as a belt and about six inches long. Glue the leather grain side down to a piece of wood to keep it firm. Apply a thin coat of oil to the flesh side of the leather. Rub a stick of stropping rouge over the surface of the leather until it has an even coating.

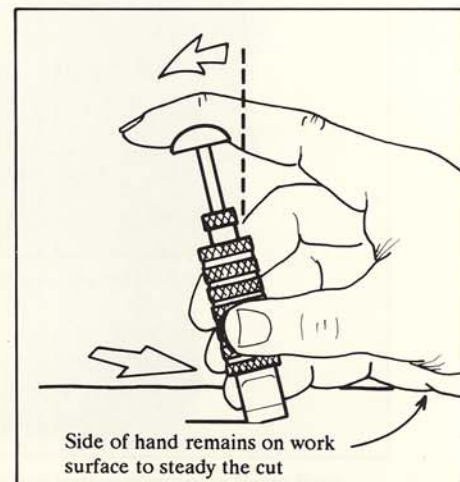
Getting ready to cut

Strop the blade on that surface about a dozen times on each edge. Keep the blade on the same angle as the bevel. Every time you put the knife down, strop it before cutting again. If your blade doesn't cut easily, strop it again.

Dampen the leather the same way you do for folding. Give it a moment or two for the fibers to expand before you begin. Hold the swivel knife so



Strop a blade often to keep it polished.



Side of hand remains on work surface to steady the cut

Hold the swivel knife at the right angle.

you cut with the forward edge. Yes, it is uncomfortable for a short time. The position feels unnatural, but it doesn't take long before the position feels natural.

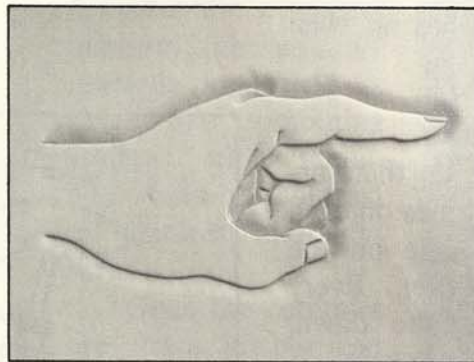
Try to keep the knife cuts straight up and down. Don't lean the blade to one side or the other. A straight cut helps make the next step easier. That's right, there is another step. Cutting the edges of a design doesn't add another dimension.

Getting design depth

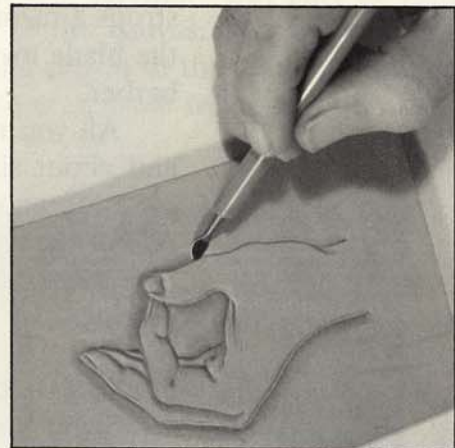
Now you are going to see an exciting ability of vegetable tanned leather. The next step is to press down the outside edge of the cut. That makes the design LOOK like it is higher. When you bend **DAMP** vegetable tanned leather it keeps the new shape. This also happens when you compress one side of your cut. It keeps that shape too. How you do this depends on your design and how high you want it to look. Several different tools will do the job. See Chapter Five for more on carving.

Modeling tools

Be sure the leather is **DAMP** before you begin. Place the modeling tool in the cut and rub it along the outside edge. As you continue to work, the compression



Beveling makes the design look raised.

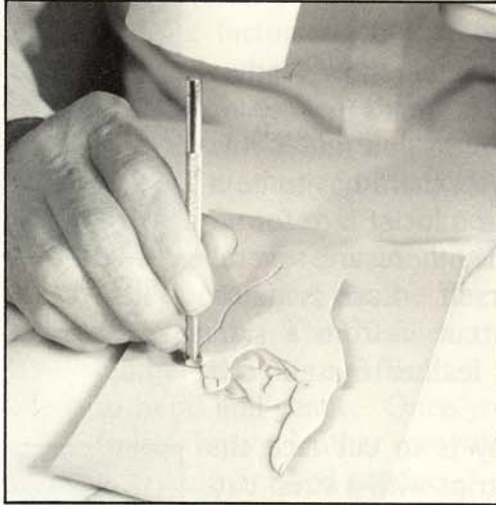


It's easy to bevel a cut with a modeling tool.

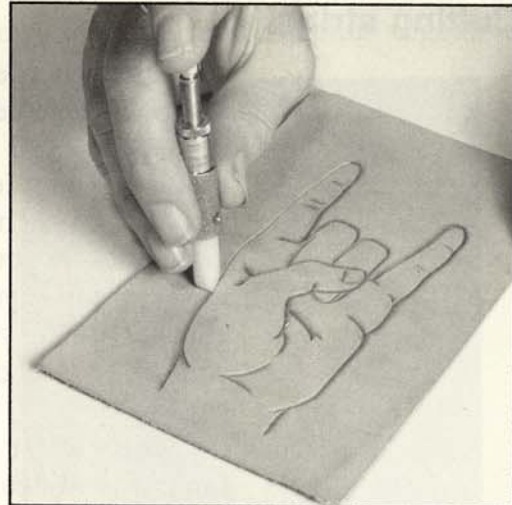
starts to take place. This tool gives you complete control over the depth of the edge. Modeling tools come in different sizes to let you add tiny detail and round out small designs.

Easy-Bevel blade for a Swivel knife

There is a small set screw on the side of your swivel knife. If you loosen that screw, you can change blades. A special nylon blade doesn't cut but works like the modeling tool for beveling. The more passes you make along a line, the greater the height of your design.



A beveling tool gives great depth to a knife cut.



Use this special blade to bevel quickly.

Beveling stamps

For the greatest depth, you can hit a tool with a mallet to bevel the edge. Don't picture a blacksmith pounding iron. This is a gentle process. Beveling tools are shaped at an angle. In DAMP leather, place the long side into your cut and tap it with a mallet.



WARNING - NEVER use a metal hammer to hit any leather tool. Metal hammers damage tools and can cause chips to fly. In your eye, any chip can be dangerous. Mallets should be wood, rawhide, or plastic.

It takes some practice to bevel without leaving tool marks. Beveling tools come in different widths. Wide tools make beveling straight lines fast and easy. Use a narrow beveler for a sharp curve or tight corner.

Beveling stamps provide another surprise. They darken the leather in the beveled areas. This color change makes your design stand out even more. You can even select bevelers with different textures. The beveled edge can be smooth or have lines or a checkered pattern.

Cutting strips

Did you ever wonder how leather companies make lace that's twenty or more feet long? Unless you find a cow more than that length, there has to be a trick. You may need a lot of lace for an art work. If you do, there are several ways to cut it yourself. Lace is much cheaper when you cut it from a skin yourself. Use dry leather for all lace cutting.

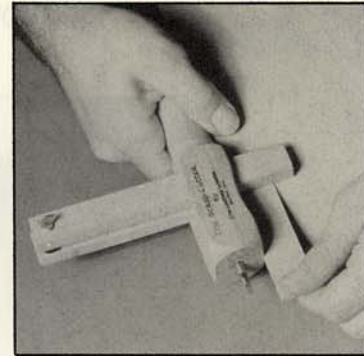
The easiest way is to cut lace the same way you cut strips with a strap cutter. If you need lace longer than the length of the skin, you can cut it from a circle. For example, you can cut up to eight feet of lace from a four inch circle. Choose the correct tool for the job you need to do.

Strap cutter

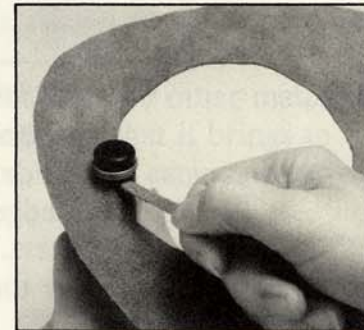
This is the tool described in Chapter Three. It lets you cut strips from a skin from 1/8" to 4" wide. The strap cutter cuts strips one at a time. It's the best tool for cutting heavy leather but will also cut thin leather. A straight edge on the leather is necessary for accuracy.

Leather stripper

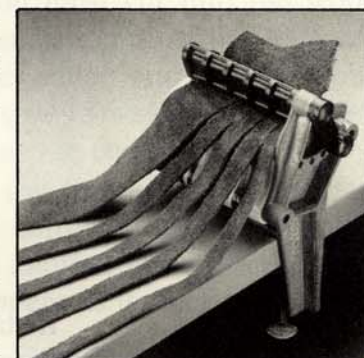
This tool cuts five strips at once. The leather stripper helps you cut suede lace. It is also useful for cutting lace from other thin leathers as well. It's the tool to use if you need a lot of thin lace cut the length of a skin.



A strap cutter lets you cut leather into strips or lace.



The Lace Maker lets you cut lace from a circle.



Strippers cut up to 5 strips of light leathers.

Lace maker

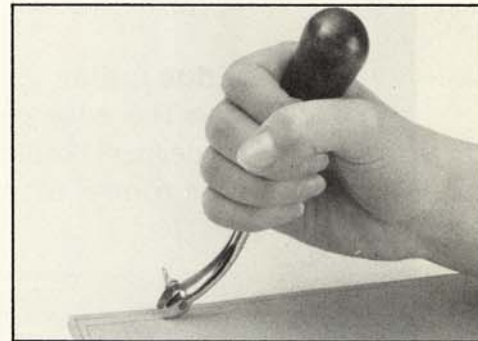
This tool helps you cut long lace from a small piece of leather. It cuts lace from a circle of leather. The lace maker cuts seven widths of lace. It does this from many different kinds and thickness of leather.

Drawing borders

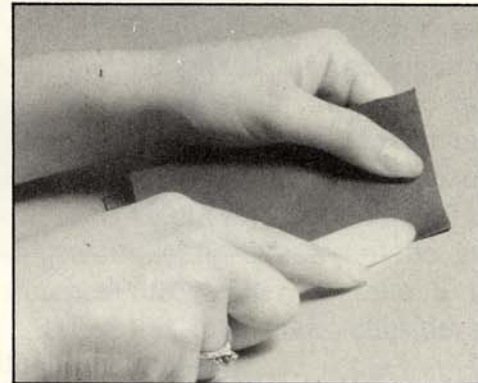
You might want to consider a border around your work. Like a framed picture, it makes the finished art stand out. Sometimes, a border can be just a light line traced with a stylus. It could also be a deep swivel knife cut. It might even become part of the art. Unless you use a gouge for a deep V shaped cut, work with **DAMP** vegetable tanned leather. There are at least five different tools to help you choose the edge to make your work look better.

Adjustable creaser

This tool doesn't cut but marks **DAMP** vegetable tanned leather. It keeps borders plain, simple, and easy. The creaser adjusts up to 5/16" wide. When you pull it along the edge, it compresses a fine line in the leather. This line remains after the leather dries. It can be striking if you dye the leather so that the line stands out. (See Chapter 5 for dye details.)



Adjustable creaser



Bone folder



Stylus

Bone folder

This tool creases an edge much like the adjustable creaser. The difference is that it isn't adjustable. The tool has two sizes to crease a border. A bone folder does five different jobs. It helps make sharp folds as well as creasing borders and smoothing edges.

Stylus

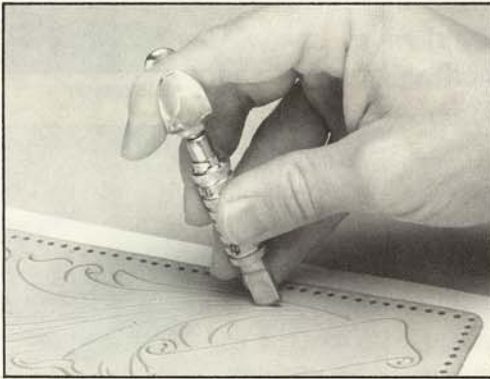
A stylus gives the same effect as the adjustable creaser. It gives the artist more control. You can draw any style or width border with this tool. Some artists use it with a straight edge while others prefer free form.

Edge cutter

The edge cutter gives a deeper border but you lose control over width. It



Edge cutter



Swivel Knife

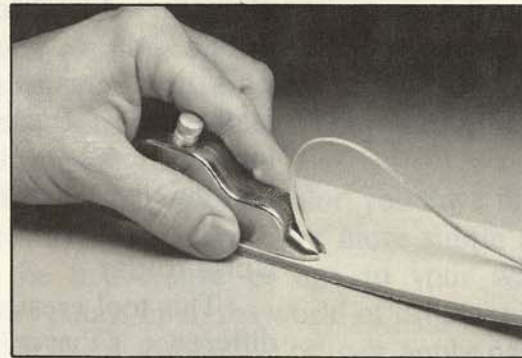
lets you cut perfect 1/8" borders with little effort. While the finished work is good, you have no choice over the width of the border. The tool has no adjustments possible.

Swivel Knife

Cutting an edge following a line drawn by the adjustable creaser or stylus lets you add depth to the border. A swivel knife gives you control of every part of the edge cutting process. If an even edge helps your design, cutting the border will make it stand out.

Adjustable "V" gouge

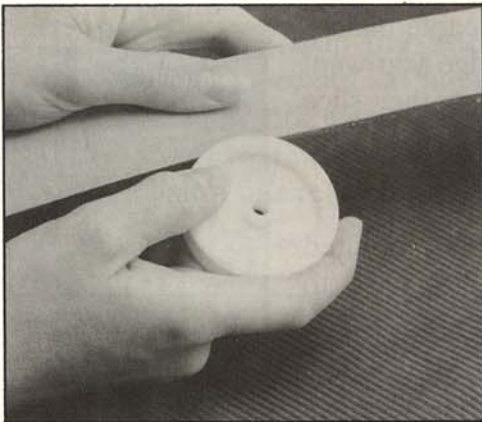
A gouge is different from all other tools in two ways. First, unlike the others, use this on dry leather. Second, it removes some of the leather and makes a "V" shape groove. You can adjust the depth of the cut. The border can be free form or you can hold the tool against a straight edge.



Adjustable "V" Gouge

Finishing edges

If you use vegetable tanned leather for your art, you may need help with the edge. You can easily smooth the edge



The circle edge slicker can make the edge smooth as glass.

Circle edge slicker

After you use the edge beveler, get the edge damp. Rub the slicker against the edge until you compress the fibers. The more you rub, the smoother the surface. If the edge doesn't get smooth, check to see that it is damp enough. If you plan to dye the edge, you might try using the dye to moisten the edge. You don't have to wet the entire piece of leather.

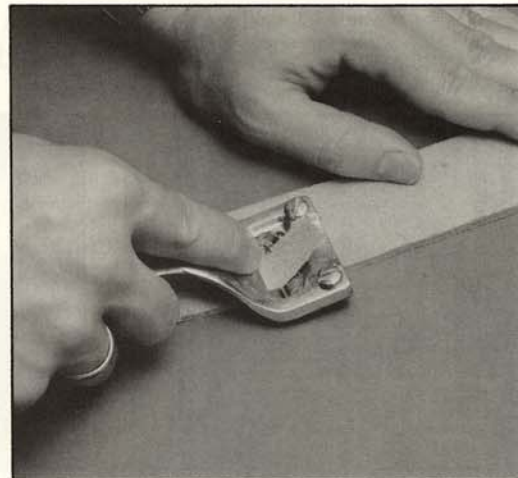


Hold an edge beveler at an angle to trim the edge.

with just two tools. The edge can be almost as smooth as glass with a little effort. All this takes is a two step process. First, trim both edges and then compress the fibers.

Edge beveler

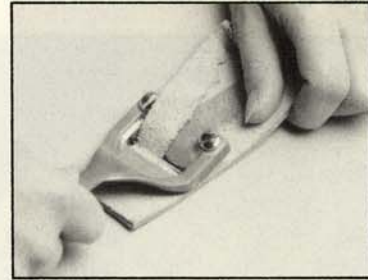
This tool trims the edge from the grain and flesh sides. You can't cut too deeply. Once the tool cuts to the correct depth, it stops cutting. Use an edge beveler on DRY leather. Hold the tool as shown in the photo while cutting. The blade is recessed so you won't get cut.



Use the skiver to make an edge thin enough to fold.

Folding edges

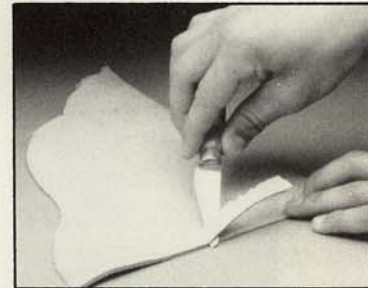
Skiving (splitting) leather from the edges makes the leather on the edge thin enough to fold. You skive dry leather, then dampen it to make the fold. When it dries again, you can glue the edges to make the edge of your art as smooth as the surface.



A skiver is safe and can't cut you unless you work at it.

Skiver

This tool uses replaceable blades. You pull it across the edge you want to thin. Each pass cuts another slice of leather away.



A skiving knife lets you get into tight corners.

Skiving knife

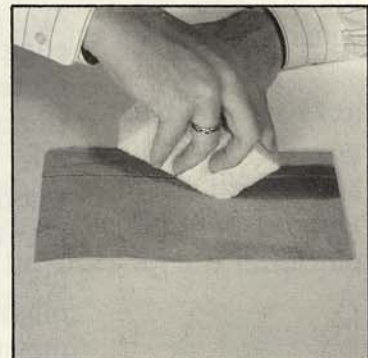
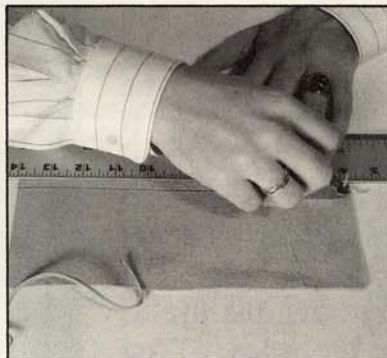
This knife has a sharp pointed blade to help you get into hard to reach places.

French edge skiver

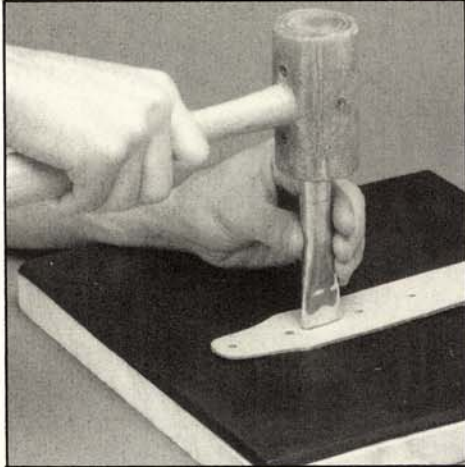
This tool lets you thin an edge up to 1/4" wide. It isn't the tool to make a folded edge. It does make a beveled edge you can use for a border.

Folding and gouges

The folding we discussed so far, leaves a gentle edge. Some design may need a sharp fold. If the leather is thin, you may be able to get a sharp fold by using a bone folder. (See Drawing borders /



A gouge lets you make a sharp bend in the heaviest leather.



Use end grain wood or a pounce board under the leather.

bone folder) Rubbing it across the edge of damp leather helps make the fold sharp.

If the leather is heavy or the bone folder isn't enough, a gouge solves the problem. The gouge makes the leather thin where you want to make the fold. Dampen the leather and use the bone folder in the slot cut by the gouge. The fold will be sharp and easy to make.

Making holes and slots

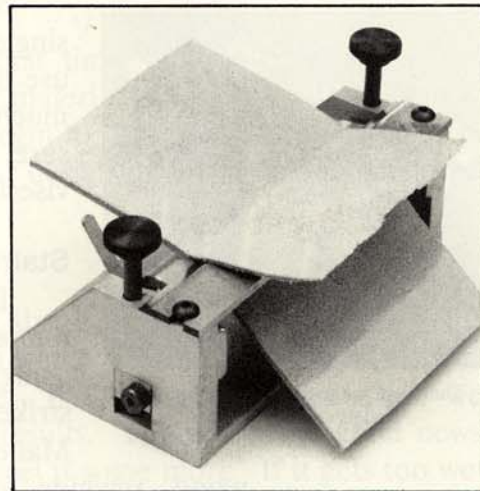
Holes and rectangular slots used for attaching leather pieces or as a part of your design are easy to make. Some sizes can be made by using a revolving punch. It takes strong hands to use this on heavy leather. A more practical tool is the drive punch. You hit the punch with a wooden, rawhide, or plastic mallet. **NEVER USE A METAL HAMMER!** Striking a punch with a

metal hammer can cause small metal pieces to fly, creating a danger for eyes. Place heavy leather, rubber or end grain wood under your leather to protect the cutting edge of the punch.

End grain wood is the end of a board. You don't see the grain. Hole punches don't dent the wood but cut a clean edge. To get a block, cut the end from as large a board as possible.

Splitting leather

A tannery isn't the only place to split leather. You can do it yourself. A bench splitter adjusts to any thickness you want. It splits leather up to 4 3/4" wide. Unless you change the adjustment, every split is exactly the same.



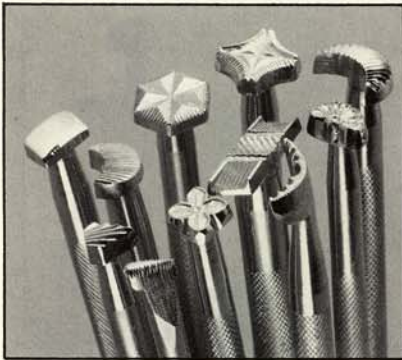
Using a splitting machine gives professional results.

Chapter 7

Making Designs on Leather

The most exciting part about working with vegetable tanned leather is designs. Almost anything is possible when it is damp. Most designs are a combination of swivel knife cuts and stamping design tools. Design tools can be made from anything that marks the leather.

Stamping tools

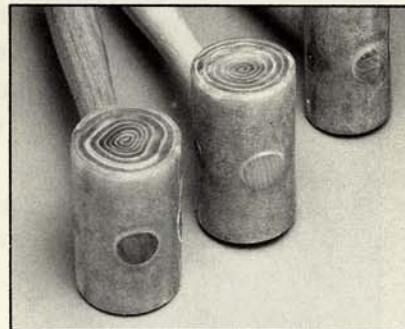


There are many different stamping tools you can use.

Stamping tools come in many designs. Using a single tool doesn't limit the possible designs. How you use the tool also creates the designs. A stamping tool is much like a brush or chisel. Stamping designs uses pressure. You can hit the tool or apply pressure through a vise-like device.

Stamping mallet

The easiest way to impress a design is by using a mallet to strike design stamps. Mallets should be wood, rawhide, or plastic. You hold the tool firmly against moist leather and strike it. Your impression should go about one third of the way into the leather.



Always use a mallet with metal tools.



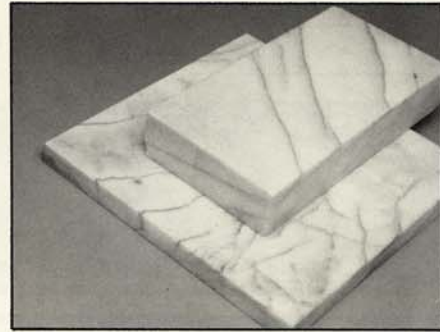
WARNING -NEVER use a hammer to hit any leather tool. Metal hammers damage tools and can cause chips to fly. In your eye, any chip can be dangerous.

Stamping surface

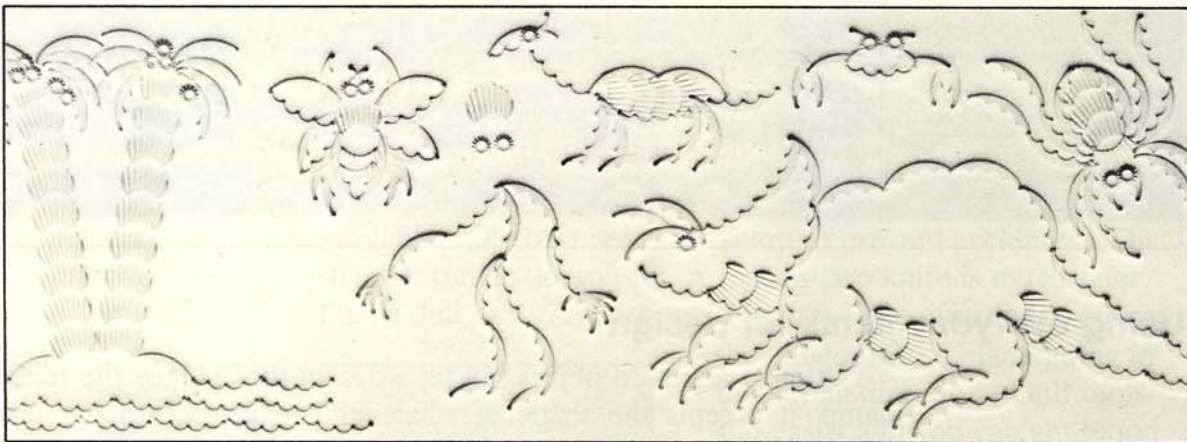
To use a stamping tool, you need a firm surface under the leather. A flat stone such as granite or marble is the best. Any flat, hard, and solid material will do. Wood is not a good surface. It makes a stamping tool bounce and doesn't leave a clear impression. Stamping on a formica table without a stone bounces and makes too much noise.

Stamping designs

The artist looking at stamping tool patterns sees a palette of designs instead of colors. Not only does the artist have the design of the stamps to use, but variations as well. Using a stamping tool only one way limits creativity. Trying different angles, opens another world of designs. For example, let's look at just 3 stamps. All the following designs use only that tool. The tree trunks and birds are made from the same tool held at an angle.



Marble makes an excellent tooling surface.

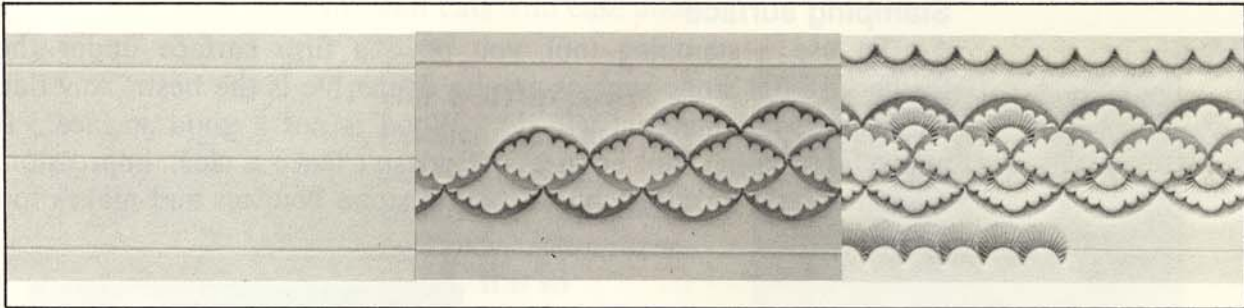


There are a variety of designs possible with just 3 tools.

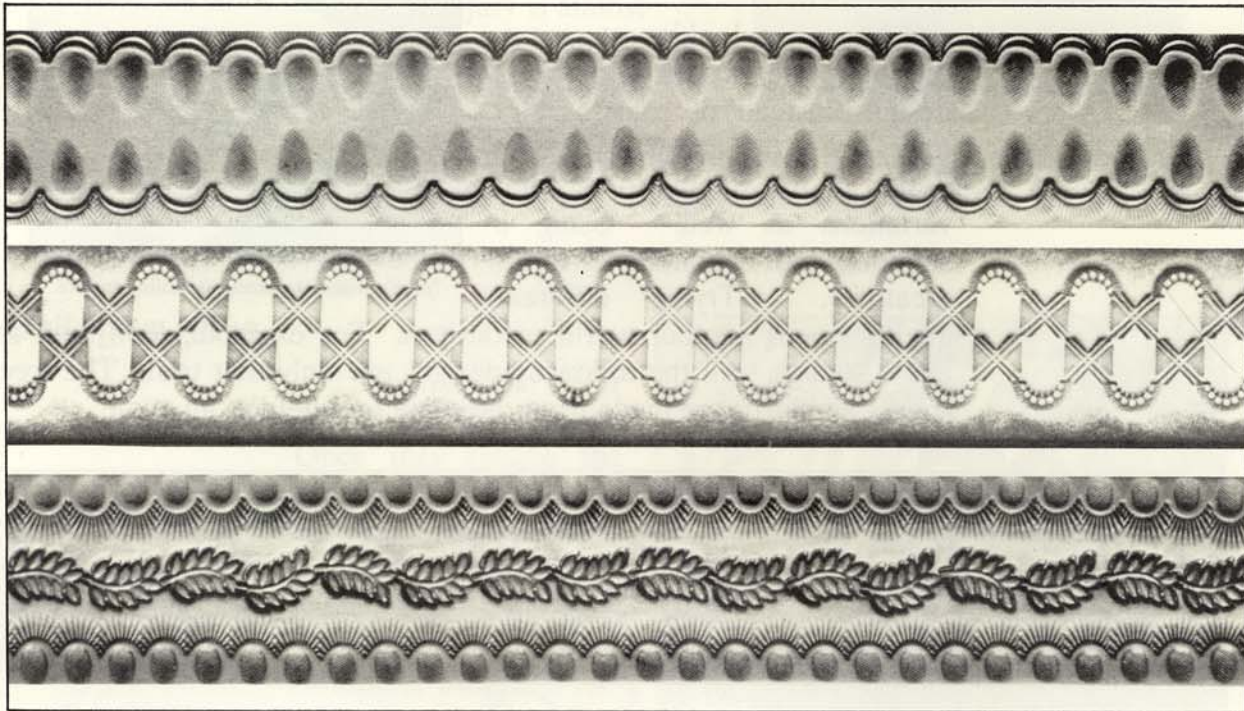
Borders

Use stamping tools for borders or design. To make even borders, mark the border line with a creaser or stylus. Use the stamping tools for the design on the edge of the line you drew. The line disappears as you stamp your pattern.

Try the simplicity of a plain border to set off your work or make the design complex. Use patterns that compliment your work.



Use lines to keep borders straight.



Using everyday items for design

Almost any hard object can be a design tool. Once the leather is damp, it accepts the shape of whatever you press into the leather. Paper clips, small nails, and wire make interesting designs.

Using these unusual tools often calls for creative methods. The goal is to apply enough pressure to force the object into the leather. While doing that, you don't want to mark the leather with whatever you use to apply the force. Unless you use a large object, a mallet isn't one of your choices.

Some artists arrange their objects on the damp leather. They cover the leather with another flat surface and apply pressure to force the impression into the leather. Almost any press or vise will create enough pressure. How to get your ideas into leather may take as much creativity as the designs themselves.

Mass produce a design

Let's say you have a design such as a school logo. You can have a leather stamp made in that form at a very low cost. All you need is a black line art drawing to have a stamp made. The stamps are 1 1/8" by 7/8". Your drawing can be larger, but the company reduces it to that size.

You use a stamping handle to press this design into damp leather. Since these stamps are large, it's difficult to get them to print well. You have to strike them several times with a heavy mallet to get a deep impression. You can use these tools with an imprinting machine or a vise.

This keeps the stamp in the same position as you apply more force.

Custom stamps can help you start your own business. For example, do the art work yourself and then use the stamp to design small objects. You could make professional looking key fobs, wrist bands, barrettes, and jewelry.



Press designs with a vise.



Custom stamps let you design your own stamping tool.



An imprinting machine gives professional results.

Carving

In Chapter 4, we introduced carving designs. Carving can range from simple cuts to techniques that take many years to master. This section takes you through the steps from an idea to a finished work of art ready for dye or paint. Some artists take leather outside and carve in the same way a painter works with paints and canvas. All their cuts are free form and the results more 3 - dimensional than any painting. The beginner usually works out a design on paper and then transfers it to leather.

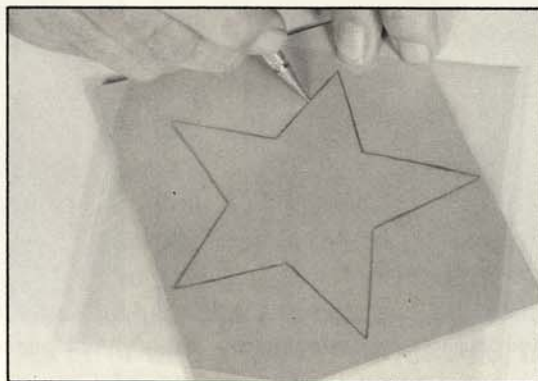
Transferring a design

The first step is to draw the design you want on your leather. It's better to do your design work on paper first. Designing directly on the leather can get expensive. Let's say you make a mistake or want to erase a line. Your original pattern may show through the finished work. Once you have the lines you want to cut on paper, you are ready to transfer the design to the leather.

In Chapter 3 we used transfer film for a cutting pattern. It's even better for transferring a design. Lay the film over your design and trace it onto the film with a pencil. Always use pencils because they are easy to erase. Ink is permanent on the film.

Once you have the design on film, dampen the leather. Remember, if the leather is thick, wet both sides before you begin. See pp. 23 and 24 for instructions about wetting leather. Lay the film on the damp leather and trace the design with a modeling tool or stylus. As you press the tool along a line, it shows on the leather. This line remains even when the leather dries.

Use a stylus or ball pen that's out of ink to transfer the design. Using an ink pen isn't a good idea because the film is thin. If it tears, you can get ink on the leather. Ink is difficult or impossible to remove. If you make mistakes with the stylus, use a modeling tool to smooth over the lines. This will erase most or all of the line.

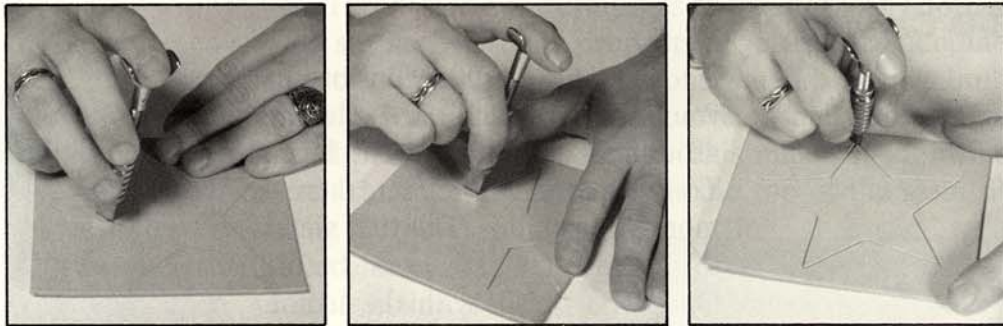


Tracing film lets you easily move an original design.

Cutting a design

Chapter Thjree showed you how to hold and sharpen a swivel knife. For clean deep cuts you need a sharp swivel knife and properly dampened leather. When you finish both steps, cutting a design is much easier. There are a few tips to help you be successful the first time. Let's say your design includes lines that connect on each end.

- Strop your knife on your leather strop between every cut.
- Start cutting from the end of a line.
- Cut in one smooth motion. Try not to stop and start or cut a line more than once unless necessary.
- Stop cutting before the end of the line. Turn the leather around and begin cutting from the other end until you meet your original cut. This keeps the ends sharp and deep.
- Don't cut across another line. Crossed lines tend to tear and don't have the clean edges you need. If lines must cross, begin your cuts on either side of the finished line. For example, a cross wouldn't be two lines. It would be three. After you cut one line the other two begin at the edge of the first line.
- Be sure the leather stays damp. If it starts to dry and cutting

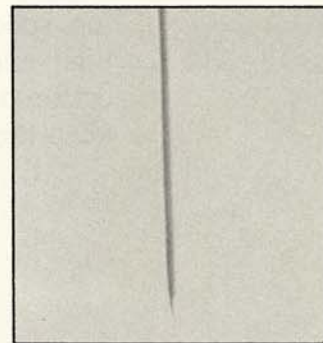


Make careful knife cuts when you carve your design.

becomes difficult, wet it again.

If you have a line that doesn't end against another line, you cut it differently. A cut that just stops at the end of a line looks unfinished. A different and easy method gives professional results.

- Start the line as before but as you approach the end, ease the pressure on your swivel knife.
- As you reach the end, your cut should taper off to nothing.



At the end of a line, taper your cut.

Beveling the edges

After you finish cutting lines, it's time to bevel each line. Before you start, study your design. Ask yourself what part of your design needs to be high? Where lines cross, which is the high side? Do you want your design to appear raised or lowered? Bevel objects of parts of objects that are in the foreground (closest to you) first. Once you know what you want, choose the widest beveler you have. Be sure your leather is damp and bevel the straight lines first.



Bevel lines carefully to make your design stand out.

Use the next smaller size beveler and bevel the wide curves.

Keep choosing more narrow tools as you bevel sharper curves. Unlike cutting lines, you can go over beveled areas again. Work for edges that don't show tool marks and the bevel appears even and natural.

3-D Carving

Carving gives the illusion that your design and the leather around it are at different levels. To get a true 3-D effect, there is more you can do. The first step is to carve the design as before. Once you finish, with the leather damp, you can press the design out from the back using a modeling spoon. Once the design is high enough, fill the cavity with cotton or anything that will help it keep the new high shape.



A design raised from the back.

Chapter 8

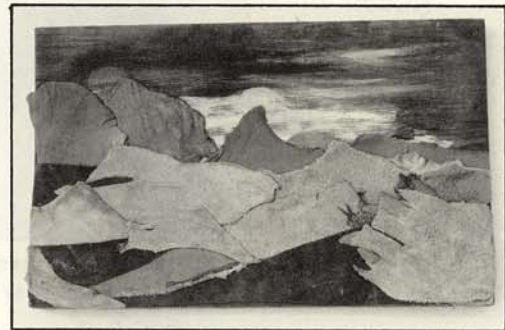
Using Pre-Finished Leather

Pre-finished leather might be suede, soft garment leather, or heavy belt leather. These leathers have one quality in common. They don't need dye or finish. The tannery finished this leather before it came to you. There are a wide variety of leathers available to artists to help their creativity. Pre-finished leathers don't hold the artist back, but offer a palate of colors and textures. They are especially useful when the artist explores art forms developed during the 20th Century.

Modern art forms

What does that mean to today's artist? Yes, leather art takes many forms, as you saw in earlier chapters. By using a pre-finished leather, the artist can concentrate on design rather than process.

Collage which comes from the French coller meaning to paste has a history of unusual effects. Artists use many different kinds of materials together to create a design, feeling, or mood. Pablo Picasso made the collage famous in his *Still Life with a Caned Chair* in 1912. Leather is perfect for the collage because it lets the artist mix colors, textures, and add a third dimension at the same time. It helps bring the collage back to the use of fine materials a



A collage lets you use every scrap of leather in your art. (by Stephanie Wehmeyer)

common definition of fine art. Some artists say that fine art is one consisting of fine materials. If that is the case, leather has an important role to play.

Much collage work comes from old materials taken from many sources. The fact that you can make leather appear new or old makes it even more important. Artists can first select the surface and size. They can then match the appearance of age that they want.

Assemblages brought a third dimension to the collage. They are sculptures containing separate pieces and different materials. Picasso and Georges Braque brought these new sculpture forms to the art world. Other artists such as Umberto Boccioni used as many as twenty different materials in a single work. Imagine an assemblage based on molded and



Leather adds unique features to an assemblage by Dana Gayner.



Parts of an assemblage can often appear alone by Roger Ward.

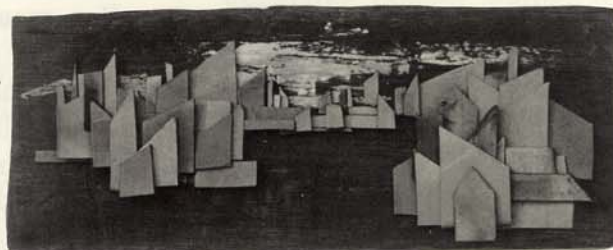
part of the outline of an object, a common cubist technique.

Broken brush strokes, shadow, and the use of light let the artist describe usual objects in an unusual way. Pre-finished

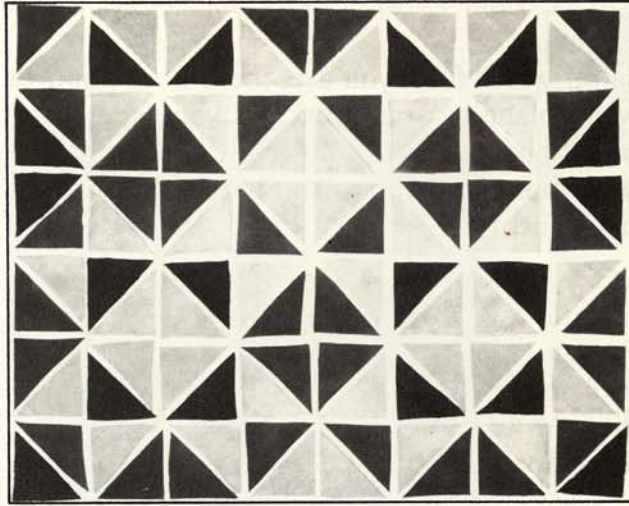
shaped leather. Combine leather with other materials to make it an interesting addition to assemblage basics.

Cubism lets the viewer see everything as a series of cubes. One of the classic rules of cubism is to clearly display the edge of each cube. Using pre-finished leather lets the artist combine cubism with the collage. As with classic cubism, the artist can display motion, mass, space, and

color. Since leather is easy to cut and shape, it lets the artist display



The cubist work includes rectangular shapes by Dana Gayner.

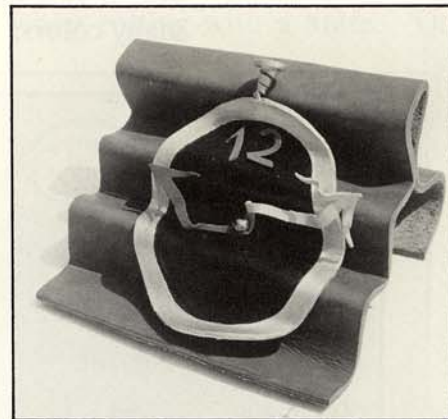


Leather adds warmth to a simple geometric.
Stephanie Wehmeyer

sculpture has been of mechanical forms. By using leather to display them, the artist provides a path from the natural to the man made.

Abstract art is usually a form where the material and the method of construction is the subject. It often draws ideas from much of the ancient works described in Chapter One. In early times artists tried to make their work life-like. Abstract artists don't make that effort. They look to the past for form, shape, and presentation. They don't try to duplicate the forms and often combine works from different cultures.

Since leather was so widely used in ancient art, it becomes a natural material for abstract art as well. It gives the artist a tool from the past to use with this new form that looks beyond reality. The art tries to find another dimension of inner beauty from nature. Let's say you describe why so many people like leather. Your answer would sound like the objectives of abstract art. The form and material go together perfectly.



Leather lets you distort a detailed sculpture.
by Alex Moliviatis

Surrealism begins where many other art forms end. It often appears as fantasy and doesn't have the links to reality of other forms of expression. The artist often displays something that looks like a distorted photograph. For example, Salvador Dali painted solid objects in sharp detail. What made his work so unique was that they

leathers bring many colors and textures to the palate to help the artist display the parts of an object rather than the reality. Their use adds to this technique that lets the viewer see the same thing from different directions at the same time.

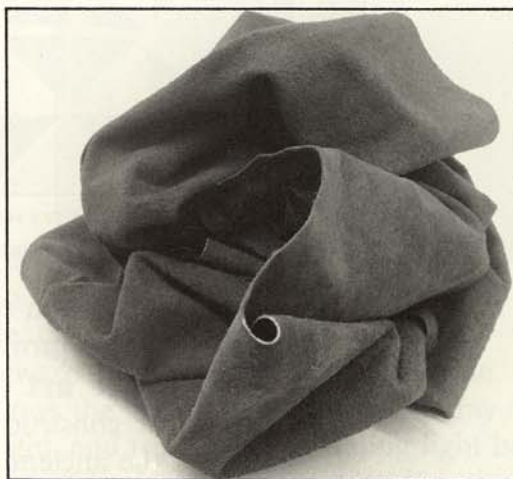
Leather lends itself to cubist sculpture as well. Shapes can appear to come from one part of the skin and blend together to take other forms. Much cubist

appeared to be fluid as well. His objects appear to flow without losing the detail.

No matter which form you use, there is an important rule to keep in mind when planning your work. If you want to hang your art on the wall, remember leather is flexible. Over time, a wide piece will sag. Support your work with a firm background like wood if you plan a large work of art.

Using suede

Do you remember from Chapter Two that suede begins as a split cut from a thicker skin? It comes in many colors that the artist can choose from. Suede cuts, folds, and glues easily. I walked into a store this week and admired the roses in a display on the wall. Looking closer, it was clear they weren't natural or even silk. These flowers were red suede. The creator cut, folded, and glued the flower to a wire stem. The suede we describe are in two basic types; pigskin and cowhide. Both leathers come in many colors.



Suede comes in many textures and from different animals.



You can weave strips of suede for unique objects
Dave Beck



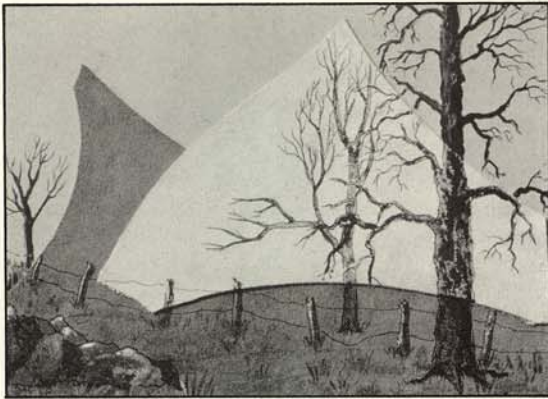
Use suede as a drawing surface for special effects.
Dave Beck.

Pigskin is sheer, thin, light, and soft to the touch. Commercially, it is often found in fine clothes which need a natural drape. It is far from what you expect leather to be, because it is so soft. It feels more like fine velvet than an animal skin.

Cowhide suede has more body than pigskin. The nap on the surface is rougher and it doesn't act or feel as much like cloth. Heavy coats, vests, and clothes that will get hard use sometimes come in cowhide suede. The forms of this leather range from soft suede for clothes to a rough heavy suede. The prices range widely as well. Suede is a good value for your art work.

Painting suede

For the artist, suede opens many different worlds. You can use suede as a painting surface. While dying suede yourself is difficult, acrylic paints work perfectly. Your suede canvas gives you a texture unlike other materials. The nap of the leather provides high contrast to your painting.



Suede acts as an unusual canvas for paint
by Dana Gayner.

Since suede comes in a variety of colors, it can be the paint as well. Some artists cut suede designs of different colors instead of painting a single piece. Once they are joined, it's often hard to tell if the design is one piece of suede or several. You can choose from many colors to get just the background you need.

You also can use other colors of suede to highlight your work. You can cut it and then replace the section with another color. Your joint becomes invisible if you attach the two pieces from the back. Other small suede pieces glued to the seam holds the art work together perfectly.



Thin molded leather makes exciting designs
by Rhonda

Wearable art

What makes suede and other leathers inexpensive is that scrap almost doesn't exist. You can use small pieces to create wearable art. Beautiful pins and earrings can be a collage of colors and textures. They become even more spectacular when combined with beads, lace and feathers. A low temperature hot glue gun holds the pieces together. There are only a few steps:

- Using an X-Acto knife or super shears, cut your shape or shapes
- Select the feathers and the beads you wish to decorate with.
- Assemble these parts so that the design pleases you. Play with it.
- Use glue or glue gun to cement the leather, feathers, and beads in place.
- To add beads easily, place a drop of glue on your work then insert into a cup of loose seed beads.



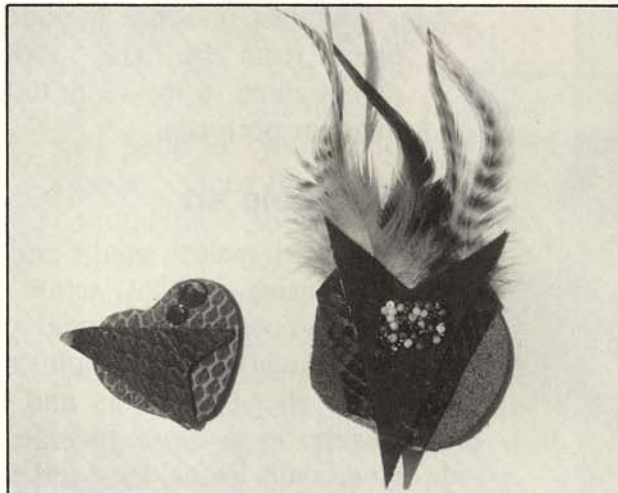
A collection of jewelry using vegetable tanned leather.

Marie Potter.

You can glue the pin or earring hardware to the back surface. It holds well to make the jewelry useful and beautiful.

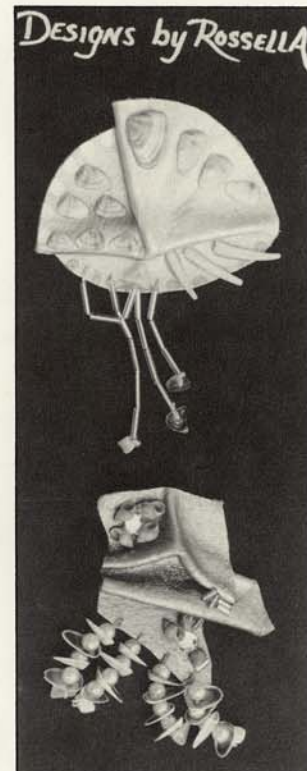
Layered art

Get out your knife and shears. With



Adding other materials highlights the leather.

Glenda Karrenbrock

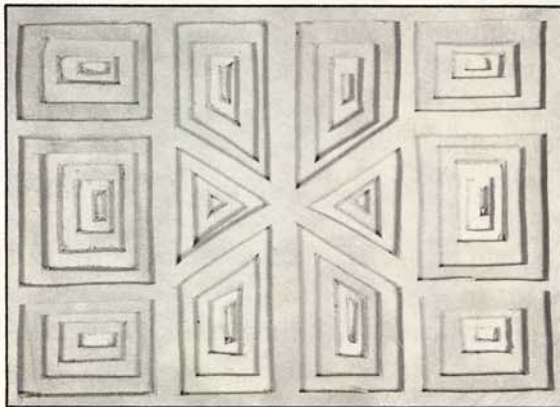


Every scrap adds to the design.

Designs by Rhonda

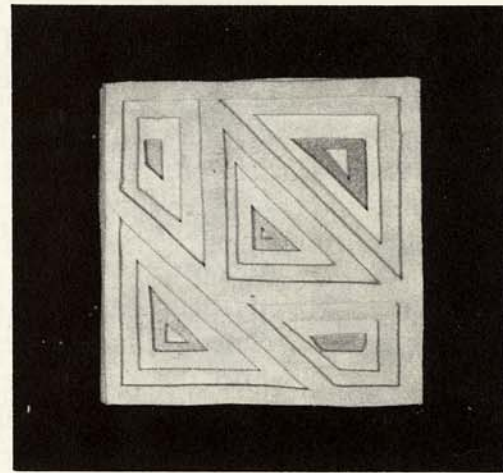
a good flat cutting surface, leather lets your creative urge run wild. Not only do you get to combine colors

but, you have the added feature of depth as well. Leather is easy to glue and almost any height is possible. For example, reducing the dimensions of a pyramid shape, circle, or rings and mixing colors cre-



Layering lets the artist combine depth, color, & texture.

Geri Greenman.



Cut each design a little larger than the one below
Geri Greenman.

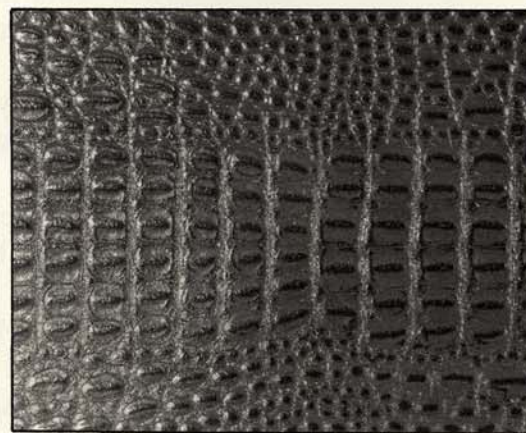
ate a spectacular presentation. Layers let you mix textures, shapes, and colors in the same piece. You can easily join different types of leather in your work.

It's only a small step from layers to covering shapes to add even more depth to your design. Cover small pieces of wood, cloth, or plastic with a thin leather to build up one area. We didn't mention foam. Yes, you can use foam but a problem comes with it. Some glues that work well with leather will dissolve foam. Try a small piece before you spend too much time with it.

Embossed Leather

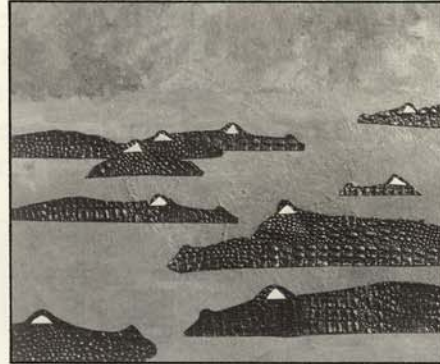
Remember, a tannery cuts splits from a thick skin to reduce the thickness. These splits can become almost anything. Many become suede but others when coated with a layer of paste, have patterns pressed into them. Most of these resemble other kinds of leather at a small fraction of the cost.

The process also lets the artist use the pattern of an endangered animal skin while keeping the animal safe.



Embossing lets splits appear like rare animal skins.

For example, ostrich and alligator are patterns available on these splits. This leather isn't in the shape of either animal. It takes the shape of a cow, because that's where it came from. The pattern on the skin is almost the same as the exotic animal. These patterns are in three dimensions. Since tanners press patterns into the splits, they keep the rough surface of alligator and the circular feather holes of the ostrich.



Use the pattern for an interesting work.
Stephanie Wehmeyer

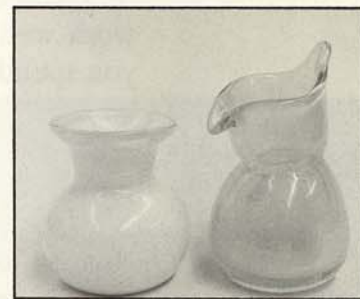
Like the baby on a bear skin rug, these leathers often provide a contrasting background for other work. Because of their pattern, they give life to other works displayed against them.

Specialized background

Every artist knows that presentation can be everything. Art may appear uninteresting until it is displayed properly. Often, the background makes the difference.

Leather as a background helps set a mood. It can provide a rustic appearance like the colors and texture of the blacksmith's apron. Picture the stains, streaks, dark colors, and scratches as a background for a bright colorful sculpture or painting. The contrast between the colors of the art and the background pulls the viewer's eye to the work. Not all leather backgrounds have to be rustic.

Suede and garment leathers provide a contrasting background for sculpture and other works as well. The folds of these soft leathers add a richness of color and texture to highlight your fine art. A contrasting texture of light yellow wool can add another dimension.



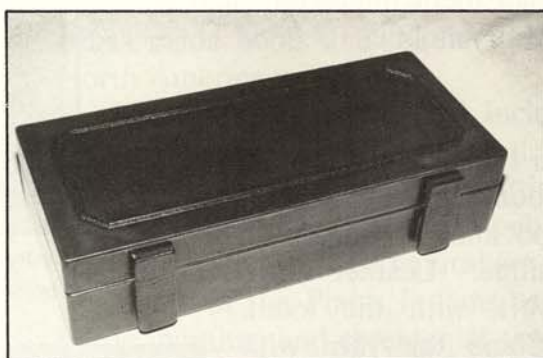
With a plain background
a vase doesn't stand out.



The leather background highlights
the design and color.

Leather covering

Let's say you design a beautiful box that is indeed a piece of art. Using leather strips for trim makes it take on a new dimension. The trim can help cover joints that may not be as perfect as you want. If your art is the shape of the box alone, consider covering the box with leather. Remember the inside too. Suede is a popular lining for small artistic boxes. It adds a richness and a finished look to the work.



Leather makes boxes and frames works of art.

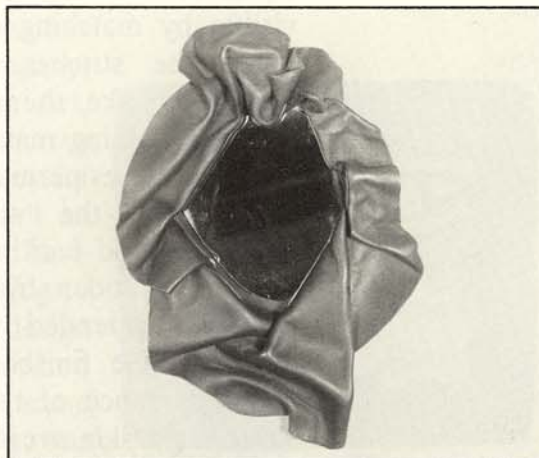
Some leathers come split until they are paper thin called skiver. While this leather looks beautiful, it will tear almost like paper. It can be made durable by bonding it to heavier leather or other materials. Splits are perfect for covering almost anything. Some artists use them to cover the rough side of heavy

leather if the work is visible from both sides.

Inexpensive wooden frames become works of art when covered with thin leather. After taking the frame apart, it's easy to cement a thin leather to the surface keeping the edges to the back of the frame. Make a paper pattern first to be sure that everything fits before cutting the leather. If your joints aren't good enough for your work, use a thin strip of the same leather as trim at each joint.

Mobiles

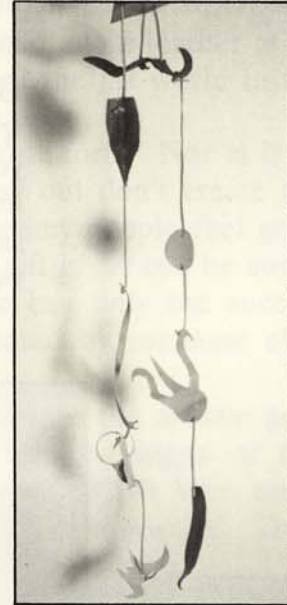
Finished leather lets the artist try styles impossible with the common materials used for mobiles. Leather cuts, bends, and colors easily. The light weight lets you make complex links. You don't need heavy supports and can pay attention to the design. Mixing colors, textures, and thickness creates some unusual effects.



Leather turns a simple mirror into art.

You can use the same material in different thickness. By changing the thickness, some parts remain rigid while others appear to flow.

A mobile can combine many different techniques of using leather creatively. Remember you need something to connect the pieces. Leather helps there as well. Think about leather lace which you can cut yourself from almost any leather. This lace is strong, flexible, and can blend in texture and color with the rest of the mobile.



Mobiles can have leather parts
by Stephanie Wehmeyer.

Wall hanging

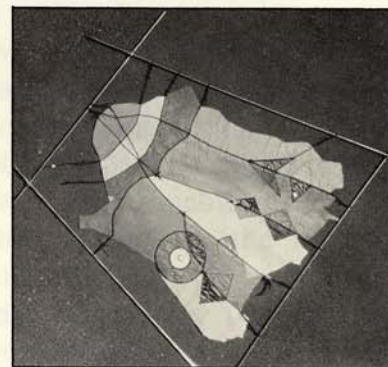
When you think of a wall hanging, wool yarn and a loom come to mind. Leather again gives you another dimension to make your work unique. Leather lace is flexible enough to work with the loom. You can combine the yarn with leather or suede lace to improve your pattern. Not only does it add different texture but lets you add special colors as well. You can paint leather lace with acrylics to make your design stand out in the wall hanging.

Stitched artA collage of colors and textures can be made by stitching the pieces together. Some artists try to make the stitches almost invisible by matching colors. Others make the stitches a contrasting color to make them part of the design. Stitching makes connecting separate pieces permanent.

Usually the stitched piece covers a wood backing. Some use an open wooden frame and hold the art suspended with lace or thread. The finished work gives the appearance of the old way of stretching a skin over a frame.



Mobile by Stephanie Wehmeyer.

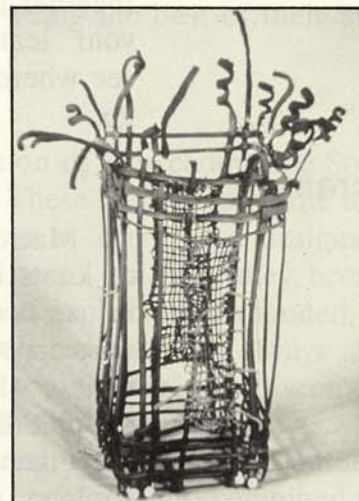


A wall hanging using leather is as old
as civilization.

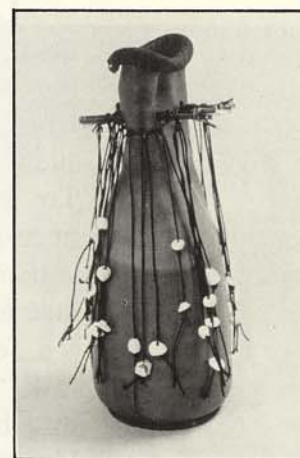
Lace

How to use lace could be a book in itself. First, let's look at what lace is. There isn't any good definition that meets all conditions. Where lace stops and leather strips begin could start an argument between any two artists. Let's say that true lace comes from a circle while strips are no longer than a skin. Lace can be rough and cut with a sharp blade. It is also possible to get lace that has the edges beveled, treated and almost as smooth as the surface.

Lace is a way of combining materials or can be art in itself. Leather lace brings a warmth and subtle color to what many consider a craft. The artist takes it a step further to give this flat material a new dimension. It can be a part of another work or be art by itself.



Leather strips let the artist's imagination run wild as in this work by Marie Potter.



Lace brings art to common objects.
Marie Potter

Applique

By attaching different colors and textures to a background, you create applique. If you go back in history, you can find samples coming from the same areas where leather was so popular. Today, you can create unusual and colorful designs using different colors of suede or thin garment leathers. The finished product can be something to wear, a wall hanging or even a framed image. Cutting small pieces lets you give fine detail to your finished work.



You can stitch thin leather on a home sewing machine. Marie Potter

The art of applique lets you use a home sewing machine if you have the right needle. The needle usually size 14 or 16 has a sharp cutting blade instead of a point. It cuts the skins to make the hole for the thread. This hole closes better than a round one. It lets your stitches almost disappear into the leather. Because the foot tends to move pieces as you sew, cement them before you

begin. Rubber cement works well to keep pieces together for sewing. Mark your leather carefully to see where the stitches will go.

Macrame

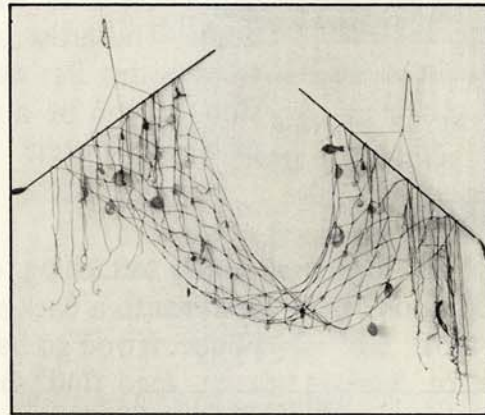
Macrame, an art form of knots which, when tied in a decorative fashion, makes a work of art. Some believe this art began in the middle east and even the name comes from Arabic. Others believe it began with fisherman's nets. Usually macrame is a series of square knots and hitch. These knots, when used together, become the hanging sculpture.

Leather lace brings color, texture, and value to the art. It can be made from any kind of lace from suede to polished leather. To get the long lengths necessary for many designs you must connect pieces of lace together.

Joining lace is a simple task. With a sharp knife, thin both ends of the lace. Use a strong contact cement to fasten them together. Chapter Nine explains in detail how to cement leather.



Detail of appliqued leather garment.



Macrame wall hanging with leather lace by Marie Potter.

Chapter 9



Putting it Together

Many art creations include several pieces. The artist has to decide how to put them together. There isn't one way to do that. How you attach pieces depends on what the art must do. For example, a collage hanging on the wall will use a different method than a piece a viewer will handle. This chapter helps you look at the different methods used to attach leather pieces and decide which is best for your work.

Fastener Choices

You get to choose from among many different methods of joining pieces. These include glue, stitching, and metal fasteners. The artist has to answer some questions before deciding such as:

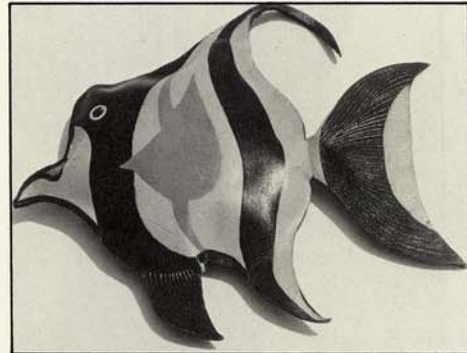
- Will you ever want to take the pieces apart?
- Must the joint bend when dry?
- Does the seam need to be strong?
- Are the pieces difficult to get straight?
- Is the connection to be a part of the design?
- Does the seam need to be invisible?
- Will the joint overlap?

Your answers to these questions help you decide which method to use. Each type of fastener has good and bad features. For example, a metal rivet is strong, and lets the leather bend but is not invisible. If you want the rivet to be a part of the design, seeing it is a

good feature. Almost any cement will bond leather IF it will not bend when dry. Many cements will crack when bending. All leather cement products remain flexible when dry.

Temporary Cement

Sometimes you want to hold pieces together for a short time. If you expect your art to change and grow, you might consider one of these products. Some artists use them to hold pieces together while you use another method for a permanent connection. For example, it is difficult to stitch leather together if the pieces are free to move and shift position. It is much easier to stitch two pieces that are cemented together.



A 3-D leather fish with the edges cemented.
Courtesy of Alex Molivatis

Rubber Cement

This cement dries slowly, allowing you the chance to move pieces while it dries. Be sure to use this product where you have plenty of fresh air. You should never use it in an enclosed place. There are two ways to apply rubber cement.



The best is to apply a thin coat to the pieces you want to attach. Allow the cement to dry to the touch and then put the parts together. Used this way, it acts as a weak contact cement. If you make a mistake, you can peel the pieces apart and start again.

You also can put the parts together before the cement dries. The connection is not as strong as the dry method but lets you easily move the parts into the position you want. For a strong bond, allow the connection to dry before you try to connect the parts.

Permanent Cement

The following cement products are for art works where the bond between pieces needs to be strong. Once you use this cement on your parts, the result is permanent. You can't take them apart. If the leather is thin, it may tear before they come apart. Be sure you know what you want before you begin. You get one chance to get the alignment right. You must do it right the first time because there isn't

going to be a second chance. Even if you can get the pieces apart, the tearing will damage them.

Be careful handling any permanent cement. If you get it on your fingers, it may have to wear off. Be especially careful to keep from gluing your fingers together. If you do, it may be painful to get them separated again.

Leathercraft Cement

This cement uses water as a base. Because of that, it dries slower but you don't have to worry about the fumes. This cement works well for pieces that the viewer won't touch. While it will bend when dry, it doesn't have the strength of other cement products. If you apply Leathercraft Cement as a contact cement, you lose the ability to move the joined pieces but gain great strength.



Cement holds the parts together as in this laminated bowl which was wet formed, cemented and then baked on the mold. by Beverly Williams

Leather Weld

This is a non-toxic liquid cement that connects pieces forever. The cement is clear, flexible, and waterproof. The bond is strong and flexible. Properly cemented parts will bend without coming apart. Use this type of cement when you need strength.



Barge Cement

This is a super-strong cement used when you need great strength. When you apply it properly, it is the strongest cement you can use with leather. It comes in a tube for easy



application. You can use this cement to bond very heavy leather.



Cement helps you attach different materials to leather.

you make sharp bends in the leather. If the pieces will bend often, it might be better to use a cement.

Low Temperature Glue

Low temperature glue comes in a stick and works with a low temperature glue gun. It melts the special glue at lower temperatures. Because of its small size, you can get into tight corners. While it is still very hot to the touch, it is much safer to use than hot glue. There is less chance of blisters if you make a mistake and get the melted glue on your skin.

Because of the low temperature, this glue won't damage fabrics or thin leather. You can use it in combination with many other surfaces such as paper, metal,

Craftsman Cement

This is a contact cement that you apply to both surfaces. Apply a thin coat to each surface. When it is dry to the touch, put the pieces together. Be careful to place the leather in exactly the right place the first time. Once the pieces touch, you can't get them apart again.

Hot Glue

Glue guns are a fast easy to use way to join leather pieces together. When the glue dries it remains strong but will crack if



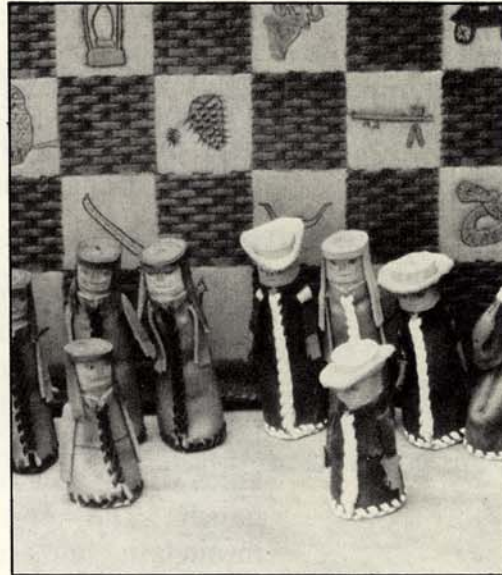
Hot glue is perfect for holding small pieces together.

and wood to get unusual effects. This glue is perfect for leather jewelry because it bonds well with metal clips or pins. (findings)

High Temperature Glue

Hot glue holds pieces together better than the low temperature glue. The bond is much stronger but you must be very careful to protect your hands from the melted glue. It can leave a blister if it touches unprotected skin.

This glue is perfect for large wall hangings because of the strong bond it gives. It also holds kinds of heavy materials together. It is not the glue to use if you work with thin delicate materials.



Leather chess set uses glue and lace to fasten pieces together by Roger Ward.

Overlap Joints

The type of joint you use is important when choosing a method of fastening. When joints overlap, such as in a collage, almost any method will work. More difficult joints need practice and the right connecting material to make the joint add to your work. The most difficult connection is to make the joint invisible.

Invisible Joints

You can make a joint invisible by a combination of steps. First, you must skive (thin) the ends of the two pieces of leather to be joined. Use a skiving tool to make the cuts. Skive the top surface of one piece and the flesh (bottom) side of the second.

When you skive both pieces carefully, the joint is almost invisible.

Cement them with a contact cement. Take great care to place the parts in exactly the right position. When the pieces touch, the bond is permanent. If you paint the surface, the joint will become invisible.



Two pieces to join



Skive (taper) the edges



A strong and almost invisible joint

Metal Fasteners

There are many kinds of metal fasteners made for leather. Some are more for decoration than holding. Eyelets for example, often appear in a single thickness. Metal fasteners connect, decorate, and provide strength for holes.

Rapid Rivets

These rivets come in two pieces; a hollow post and cap. Cut a hole just large enough for the post to go through. Cut the holes with a hole or drive punch. The post goes through the bottom of the pieces to join. The top of the post should just appear above the top piece of leather. A cap fits tightly on the post.

To set a rivet, be sure to place the base on a flat hard surface like stone or metal. Strike the cap using a rivet setter and mallet. As you hit the cap, the setter keeps the shape of the cap.

The post flattens inside the cap and hold the parts together.

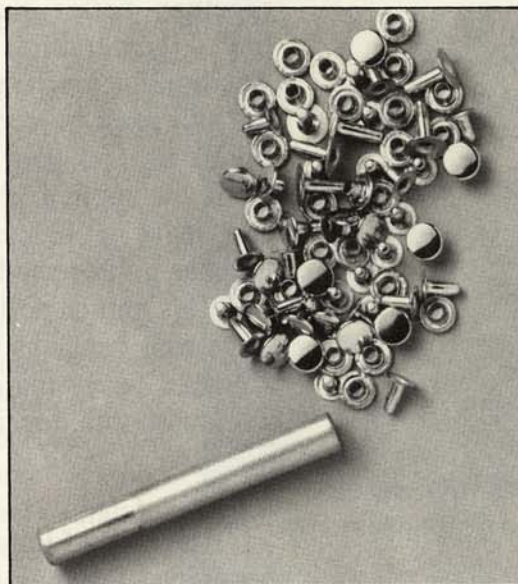
Rapid rivets come in four sizes. Other than small, all caps are the same size. The major difference is the length of the post. The finished rivet is smooth and provides a finished look.

Knobby Rivets

These rivets come in two parts like the rapid rivets. The post is thin and much like a tack. You can cut the post with wire cutters to get the right length. The cap of this rivet sets by hand. Place the cap on top and force it down over the post with your finger. The cap grips the post and makes a tight connection. These dome shaped caps add another dimension to the joint.

Copper Rivets

Unless you want to hang from a telephone pole held by a leather belt, you may not want these rivets. They are the strongest way to hold two pieces of heavy leather together. The rivets come in two parts, a solid post and a burr that looks like a washer. The setter



does two jobs. First it forces the burr over the post until it forces the pieces together tightly. Second, another part of the setter spreads the end of the post, locking the parts together.

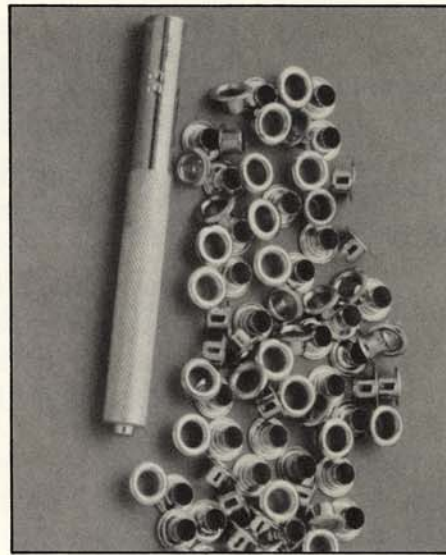
The posts of these rivets come in two lengths; 1/2 and 7/8 inches (1.2 and 2.3 cm). They bring a roughness to your work that might add to your design. While you may not need them for strength, they do provide a unique way of fastening leather.

Tacks

The easiest way to attach leather pieces to each other on a wood background is a tack. These are like large upholstery tacks with large decorative heads. Some artists use these to outline a hanging design. Tacks don't hold well to leather alone but work perfectly with wood.

Eyelets

If you look at your shoe, it may have eyelets to keep the laces from cutting the leather. Eyelets come in two diameters of 1/4 and 3/16 inches. They also come in two lengths for use with thin or thick leather. Eyelets are one piece items that go through a hole you cut in the leather with a drive punch. The head of the eyelet fits in an anvil placed on a hard stone or metal surface. As you drive the setter from the other side, it rolls down the edge to make it grip the edge of the hole.



Eyelets can be a way for the artist to add contrast, bright metal, and a uniform shape to their work. The usual purpose for an eyelet is to protect a hole but artists often use them for design as well. An eyelet can hold two pieces of thin leather together. While it does work, the connection is not strong.

Grommets

The main difference between an eyelet and a grommet is the size. A grommet helps protect a larger hole than an eyelet. It also comes in two parts that include the grommet and a washer. The wide part of the grommet is on one side of the leather while the washer protects the other side.

A grommet is much stronger because of the washer and holds better than an eyelet. Grommets set the same way as an eyelet. The only difference is the washer.

Leather Lacing

Some artists like to use leather lace to join parts. This lace adds a richness and another dimension. It comes in several thicknesses, colors, and textures. Using lace can be an art form by itself. You can join parts with a simple stitch or braiding patterns. Like leather use in art, there isn't just one way to use lace.

It is also possible for the artist to create their own leather lace. Using a lace maker lets you use the same leather as your art to match the pieces exactly. Consider the following possibilities when you choose lace:

- Calf Lace - fine lace usually for billfolds, cases, and finished bags
- Goat Lace - made from goatskin for strength and fine grain
- Suede Lace - cowhide suede used when you need a rough finish and bright colors
- Latigo Lace - made from oil tanned leather used for boot laces and mobiles
- Grained Vinyl Lace - looks like calf but made from vinyl. There are several kinds of vinyl lace available. It comes in many bright colors to add contrast to your work.
- Round beveled Lace - has edges beveled to make the lace perfect for jewelry and beading art works
- Rawhide Lace - needs to be wet to become flexible and shrinks as it dries



Even clothes can be assembled with lace.

We won't go into how to use the lace here. It's a subject that takes an entire book to cover. There are dozens of "How to Lace" books on the market you can use to get ideas for your own work.

Sewing Leather

Yes, you can sew leather. No, you don't need a heavy commercial sewing machine. It is possible to sew the heaviest leather sculpture or fine leather for clothes. While you don't do them the same way, they have much in common.

Stitching or sewing leather doesn't begin like sewing cloth. You must cut a hole for the thread to go through. Leather fibers won't separate when you try to force a needle through them.

You can either cut the hole before you use a needle or use a needle with a blade on the end. That's right, a leather needle has a fine sharp blade on the end instead of a point. These needles come in forms for hand sewing and others fit a standard home sewing machine as well.

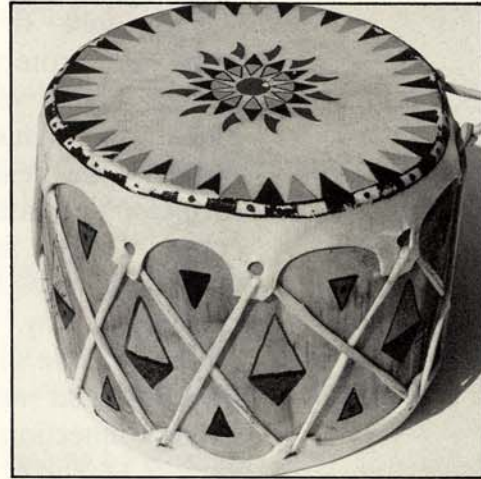
Machine Sewing

Your home sewing machine will sew thin garment leathers and most suedes. It isn't strong enough for heavy leather. That must be sewn by hand. To sew thin leather parts, cement the edges together first. The cement can be rubber cement that you can get apart if necessary. Cementing the edges keeps them in the proper place for stitching.

A leather sewing machine needle has a diamond shaped point with sharp edges. It cuts a hole through the leather and then pulls the thread through the hole. If you try to sew leather with a pointed needle, it will break because it can't push the fibers apart.

Hand Stitching

To stitch heavy leather, start by cementing the edges. Once they are in position you first cut holes for the thread. There are several



Rawhide lace keeps the head tight because it shrinks.

ways to cut these holes. The easiest way to cut holes is with a thin stitching chisel. These let you cut one or four holes at a time.

Be sure to have a wood or protecto board surface under your seam. Since the chisel goes through the leather, the surface underneath becomes very important. Once you cut the holes, stitching is easy. You can use one needle or two with waxed thread to make a strong connection.



Snaps

Some artists want the viewer to get involved and handle their art. There are works that you must move or open a part to see the rest of the design. You may want a snap to keep a part closed part of the time. Snaps also become a part of wearable art as well. They set and work easily.

While there are many kinds of snaps, we will look at only two. They are both easy to set and will meet almost any snap need. To choose the right snap, you need to answer several questions.

- Will you use the snap often like the snap on a wrist band?
- Will you use the snap occasionally like those to keep belt buckles in place?
- Does the snap need to be small?
- Do you want the top of the snap to contrast like gold or nickel?
- Do you want the top of the snap to blend in by having a brown or black top?

Belt and Glove Snaps

These come in brown, black, gilt and nickel. The belt snap is heavier and larger than the glove snap. They both set the same way with a **Segma Snap Setter**. It takes some care to set these snaps correctly. If you strike the setter too hard, you can damage the snap.

Durable and Baby Dot Snaps

Dot Snaps are both larger and stronger than the belt and glove snaps. They come in gold-tone and nickel finish. The durable dot is heavier and larger than the baby dot snap. They both set the same way with a Dot Snap Setter kit. These are the easiest snaps to set correctly the first time you try.

Index

A

- Abstract Art..... 75
- Adjustable "V" Gouge 62
- Adjustable Creaser 61
- Africa..... 8
- Africa, north 6
- Antique Stain..... 46
- Applique..... 83
- Art
 - creative 12
 - definition..... 1
- Assemblage 74
- Aztec
 - designs..... 9

B

- Back 22
- Barge Cement..... 87
- Belly 22
- Beveling 72
- Bible
 - leather reference 3
- Black
 - special dye technique..... 54
- Block Dyeing..... 53
- Boccini, Umberto..... 74
- Bone Folder 61
- Books 8
- Borders 67
- Braiding..... 9
- Braque 74
- British Museum 5
- Buying Leather 21

C

- Canada..... 10
- Canvas & Leather 36
- Carving 55, 70
 - 3-D..... 72
- Cement
 - permanent..... 86
 - temporary 86
- Ceramics
 - and suede..... 37
- Ceramics
 - and leather..... 37
- Chrome Tanned Leather 19
- Collage..... 19, 26, 73

- Colonial Period..... 12
- Commercial Art..... 38
- Conservation..... 2
- Copper Rivets 91
- Cova Color..... 47
- Craftsman Cement..... 88
- Cubism 74
- Cutting Leather..... 25
- Cutting Lines..... 55
- Cutting Strips 60

D

- Dali, Salvadore..... 76
- Design
 - cutting 71
 - mass produced..... 69
 - transferring..... 70
- Designs 68
- Drawing Borders 61
- Drums
 - tribal..... 7
- Drying Leather..... 30
- Dye
 - rules..... 50
- Dye and Stain..... 43
- Dyeing Leather..... 42

E

- Edge Cutter 62
- Edges
 - finishing 33
- Egypt 3 - 4
- Embossed Leather..... 79
- Eskimo 9
- Europe 7
- Eyelets..... 91

F

- Fasteners
 - metal 90
- Finish..... 48
- Finishing Edges..... 63
- Folding Leather 64
- Folk Artists..... 12
- French Edge Skiver 64

G

- Germany 7
- Gold
 - stamping 7 - 8
- Greece..... 3, 5
 - pottery..... 5

Grommets.....92
 Guild, leather8

H

Herodotus.....5
 Holes
 making65
 Homer5
 Hot Glue.....88
 high temperature.....89
 low temperature88

I

Inca
 designs9
 Indian
 dress11
 native American2
 Italy.....3

J

Jewelry78
 Joining Leather Pieces.....85
 Joint
 invisible.....89
 Joints
 overlap.....89

K

Kayak.....10
 King Tut.....4
 Knobby Rivets.....90

L

Lace
 grained vinyl.....93
 joining84
 latigo93
 rawhide93
 round beveled.....93
 uses.....83
 Lace Maker60
 Lacing.....92
 calf.....92
 goat92
 suede.....93
 Latigo18
 Layered Art.....78
 Leather.....1
 artist3
 as a by-product.....1
 as an art medium12

 as color.....54
 boats5
 books6
 Care22
 cement.....27
 cost.....13
 covering.....81
 cutting.....13
 early reference3
 embossed79
 enemies23
 fibers.....1
 finish48
 folding64
 helmets3
 history.....2
 in graves7
 making.....2
 paint.....47
 painted19
 pre-finished73
 qualities1
 saddle8
 shoes1
 thickness.....21
 types.....14
 use.....1
 windows.....4

Leather
 jewelry13
 Leather Stripper.....60
 Leather Weld.....87
 Leathercraft Cement87

M

Macrame84
 Mask
 adding color32
 finishing.....33
 Masks31
 Metal & Leather35
 Middle Ages8
 Middle East3
 Mobile.....81
 Moccasins.....9
 Modeling Tool.....30
 Moistening
 testing for29
 Moistening Leather.....27 - 28
 Molding Leather27
 Morocco3

- N**
- National Gallery of Art.....8
 Natural Finish.....41
 Neat Lac.....49
 New World.....9
 North America.....9
- O**
- Oak Bark.....19
 Oil
 for leather survival.....22
 Oil Dye.....45
 Oil Tanned Leather.....18
- P**
- Paint.....47
 Paint Markers.....48
 Painted Leather.....19
 Pattern
 cutting.....24
 Picasso, Pablo.....73
 Pigskin.....76
 Plains Indians.....11
 Presentation.....80
- R**
- Rapid Rivets.....90
 Rattles.....11
 Rawhide.....16
 preparing.....16
 problems.....17
 sculpture.....17
 Resist.....52
 Rivets.....90
 Rome.....6
 Rubber Cement.....86
- S**
- Sand & Leather.....38
 Sculpture.....33
 Sewing
 hand.....94
 machine.....93
 Sewing Leather.....93
 Sewing Machine.....84
 Shaping Leather.....30
 Shears.....25
 Shields
 rawhide.....7
 Sides.....22
 Silhouette.....52
- Skiver.....64
 Skiving Knife.....64
 Slots
 making.....65
 Snaps.....94
 belt and glove.....95
 durable and baby dot.....95
 setting.....95
 Soaking Leather.....28
 Spain.....3
 Spectra Shade Dye.....46
 Spirit Dye.....44
 Splitting.....65
 Splitting Leather.....21
 Stamping
 designs.....67
 mallet.....66
 surface.....67
 Stamping
 tools.....66
 Stitched Art.....82
 Stone & Leather.....38
 Strap Cutter.....26, 60
 Stylus.....24, 62
 Suede.....76
 cowhide.....77
 painting.....77
 Super Shene.....49
 Surrealism.....75
 Swivel Knife.....56, 62
- T**
- Tacks.....91
 Tandy, Charles.....11
 Tanning.....2, 14
 oak bark.....2
 Thebes.....4
 Top Grain.....21
- V**
- Vegetable Tanned Leather.....19
- W**
- Wall Hanging.....82
 Wearable Art.....77
 Wetting Leather.....27
 Wood & Leather.....34
- X**
- X-Acto Knife.....78

About the author:

Robert Buck is a internationally known author. He now writes for Prentice Hall, a division of Simon and Schuster and for Tandy Leather Company. This is Mr. Buck's fifth book covering a variety of subjects. He has spent almost 40 years in education and has supervised art instruction for more than 12 years. Mr. Buck draws practical ideas from teaching experience ranging from elementary grades through graduate school.

