

Is there a future for leather in the 21st century?

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What is leather?

Leather is an ancient product and tanning leather is one of the oldest crafts. Think about the images of our ancestors, the Greeks and the Romans where they are depicted wearing clothes and shoes made from rudimentary kinds of leather and fur.

However, leather is modern too. Think about leather used in shoes, clothes, accessories, jewels, chairs, sofas and rugs. Leather is used in technology as well.

We are all familiar with the touch and smell of leather, but it can be hard to put these into words.

The “International Glossary of leather terms” defines leather as follows:

“Leather is a general term for hide or skin which still retains its original fibrous structure more or less intact and which has been treated so as to be imputrescible even after treatment with water. The hair or wool may or may not have been removed. Certain skins without the hair removed are termed fur.”

To go on, this definition also mentions that “no product may be described as leather if its manufacture involves breaking down the original skin structure into fibres, powder and/or other mechanical methods and reconstructing the fragments into sheets or other forms.”

During the tanning procedure, the leather can be treated to make it softer, to colour it, to make it waterproof, fire-resistant, or anti-static.

The base material of leather is animal skin. Animal skin is a residual product of the meat industry: no animals, no leather.

Our ancestors went hunting, killed an animal, fed themselves with the meat and then treated the skin with the animal’s intestines (the tannin) as a precursor of the tanning procedure.

In order to produce leather on a large scale, large amounts of water and chemicals, mainly tannins, are needed. The least environmentally friendly tannin is Cr III. This is why leather and leather production are controversial nowadays.

The era of people keeping cattle at home, killing it themselves and eating it is over. We should keep in mind that for centuries, people's wealth was judged by the number of animals they possessed.

Today, young people are easily influenced by footage filmed at slaughter houses. It is logical they are upset by such images, as they see animals only as pets. Of course animal wellbeing is important in our society. However, there is nothing wrong with producing leather from animals meant for meat production, as we are merely using a residual product.

Tanning leather is an irreversible process including 30 to 50 processes. Tannins used today are:

- Vegetable tanning materials: mimosa, quebracho, etc.
- Mineral tanning products: chromium, zirconium, alum
- Oils and greases: fish oils, synthetic oils, etc.
- Synthetic tanning products: polyphosphate, glutaraldehyde, etc.

85% of tanners worldwide still use chromium III for tanning. Keep in mind that a hundred years ago, we hardly knew anything about the danger some tannins (and other chemicals) constitute to our planet. We did not know that it would be damaged by all kinds of chemical processes and excessive water use.

Today, the leather industry can no longer use this excuse. The majority of the tanners worldwide now use the right machines and monitor waste production in order to produce good quality leather. The employee's health is also taken into account. Leather produced in tanneries that adopt these production methods can be called "sustainable leather". Of course there are still parts of the world which show a disregard for animal wellbeing, environmental impact and humanity. The leather produced in these parts of the world is considered "unsustainable".

What is sustainability?

A widely used definition is the one put forward by the Brundtland Commission in the 1980s: *“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”*.

The organisation “Leather Naturally” tries to raise awareness among tanners and leather producers around the world and to convince them to produce sustainable leather. It also looks for innovative tanning methods, tannins and other chemicals.

The Leather Working Group (LWG) developed an audit protocol to oversee a sustainable and responsible leather production and processing. The organisation already has stakeholders across 21 countries.

The manufacture of leather looks to be good for humanity and good for the planet, considering it is made of a renewable raw material, the production can be made sustainable, it is a very versatile and durable product and it also creates many jobs.

As long as we accept reality and keep striving to learn and to improve, to be open and transparent, leather is unquestionably a sustainable product.

Sources :

- Course “Leder - en schoentechnologie” by Maryelle Gaillez-Vinckier
- International Glossary of leather terms by International Council of Tanners
- Leather Naturally – Mike Redwood spokesman
- Leather Working Group