

Chanuka Swarnathilake

### 3 Leather: A Conventional Material for Fashion

**Abstract:** This chapter discusses leather, one of several conventional materials long worn by people. Although leather is made from a dead animal, no animal needs to be killed solely for leather. Most leather is a by-product of the meat industry. Today, the fashion industry is the main driver of the leather trade.

**Keywords:** conventional materials, fashion, leather sustainability

Natural leather is made from animal skin, mainly from cow hide (Figure 3.1), but can also be made from other species, including buffalos, goats (Figure 3.2) and sheep (Figure 3.3). Man-made leather is also produced; however, this chapter focuses only on natural leather.



**Figure 3.1:** Cow leather case to hold injera, Ethiopian flat bread (photo: Allan Degen).

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Chanuka Swarnathilake, Graduate Research Assistant



**Figure 3.2:** Goat leather shirt for Ethiopian girl  
(photo: Allan Degen).

In the past, humans hunted animals for food and later realised that the skins could be used for clothing (Figure 3.4). The use of animal hides to make clothing goes back to ancient times, with the use of leather first recorded in history with the Egyptians in 1300 BC. Other peoples in Asia, Europe and North America also used leather for clothing in the same era to protect the body and keep warm. Later, around 1200 BC, the Greeks began to use leather for decorative clothing and armour, which was expanded during the Roman Empire (MAHI Leather, n.d.).

In the modern world, leather has been used for making military materials including belts, boots, coats, shoes and armor tools. It was introduced as a fashion item during the 1960s and the influence of actors in the film industry helped leather to become a popular item in the fashion industry. Singers and models contributed to the popularity of leather clothing, including jackets and trousers. With time, leather clothing became attractive among more people (MAHI Leather, n.d.).

Cowhides are by-products of the food industry. They are sent to a tannery<sup>1</sup> (see Figure 3.5) and later converted into fashion items including shoes and bags. Leather made from sheepskin is used to make winter clothes, for example, jackets, and gloves that feel soft. Leather products made from pig skin are also soft, durable and afford-

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<sup>1</sup> A tannery is a place where skins are processed. Tanning is the process of treating skins and hides of animals to produce leather.



**Figure 3.3:** Sheep leather overcoat with wool lining (photo: Allan Degen).

able. Goat leather has unique qualities including being water-repellant and can easily be air-dried. Leather products made of other animal skins, for example, alligators, cats, dogs, fish, horses, kangaroos, seals and snakes, are durable and can last for more than 50 years (Steel Horse Leather, 2020).

From the sustainability perspective, leather and leather by-products can be recycled (Smit and Zoon, n.d.). Leather pieces can be reused, for example as boxing punch bags, or they can be combined with other materials to make composite products like leatherboard (Leather Naturally, n.d.).

Leather naturally absorbs and holds moisture from the skin until it evaporates. Another advantage of leather products is that they can be dry cleaned (Leather Naturally, n.d.). Compared to synthetics, leather is to be considered more eco-friendly (Buckle and hide leather works, n.d.).

Leather Working Group (LWG), a global body, works together with different actors in the leather value chain where leather is used, ensuring responsible leather production. LWG is committed to delivering several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Leather Working Group, n.d.).



**Figure 3.4:** Tibetan man wearing leather coat and hat (photo: Allan Degen).

Given the current demand for natural leather in the fashion industry, various universities offer degree programmes related to leather. The University of Northampton offers courses which are unique in the UK and make the graduates highly employable. Students explore the world of fashion using numerous materials including leather and other eco-friendly products. The courses contain marketing elements, which include guest lectures from prominent industry experts. The students also have the opportunity to enter their designs into national and international shows and have travel opportunities to fashion capitals such as Tokyo and New York (University of Northampton, n.d.).

The State University of New York (SUNY) offers a certificate programme to students and individuals pursuing additional knowledge in leather. This programme aims to develop skills to a professional level in leather apparel design for both menswear and womenswear. Students discuss leather science, sourcing, history, and trends, use of decorative techniques, cut garments. They learn various sewing techniques, draw, design, and render leather apparel and accessories, and, moreover, drape, create patterns and spec leather garments and accessories (State University of New York, n.d.).



**Figure 3.5:** Tanning leather (photo: Léo-Paul Dana).

The Leather School of Hermès recruits participants for a diploma program developed to gain all required skills in producing leather products, such as gloves and bags. They use innovative and effective techniques in their training to make sure that every participant obtains all required skills (Hermès, n.d.).

Today, consumers have changed. They have a good understanding in terms of the quality of the products, types of leather products, and texture due to the ease of internet access and especially social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Manufacturers of leather products, including fashion brands, should consider the responsibility and sustainability of their products since consumers are more focused on these aspects now.



Critics of the leather industry should also be mentioned, although large-scale leather manufacturers are making efforts for production process to be eco-friendly. Mass customisation, that is the industry catering to the needs of specific customer groups or individuals, is a strategy to reduce the wastage caused (Magzter, n.d.).

Over time, the use of leather products evolved from fulfilling basic and military needs to fashion items including clothing, footwear and bags. With society changing and the influence of celebrities, fashion items made from leather became a more mainstream material. With increasing customer awareness of sustainable products, manufacturers are more conscious of the environment and move forward to deliver what customers are expecting.

International movements, such as the Leather Working Group, are trying to develop sustainable industries and make sure to be responsible for what customers are expecting. Various universities offer degree programmes by incorporating modern technologies that can be beneficial for the sustainability of the industry. According to De Klerk, Kearns and Redwood (2018), brands should notify consumers regarding their good environmental practices and ethical standards.

As animal activists express concern about the killing of animals, the future may see increasing use of leather alternatives. Among these are: Pinatex, made from pineapple leaf fibres; and MuSkin, which is produced from mushrooms.

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