



Faux Real—a book to fall in love with

Faux Real is a new work by Robert Kanigel that provides a fascinating insight into the world of leather. A big problem with tanners over the ages is the way they have tended to fall in love with the product, rather than asking the customers what they think of it. Romancing the product is the disease of production people who like to tell their colleagues that sales and marketing expense is not needed because “my leather sells itself”. So here at last is a book for these tanners to fall in love with, one which is not a list of formulae or a time-line of events running from ancient Babylon to Jimmy Choo, but a book which takes leather apart diagnostically and gracefully. It interrogates how leather has spent centuries dealing with fakes and synthetic copies and through this window lets us see why leather wins out in the eye, hand and nose of the consumer and, correctly made and sold, looks likely to carry on doing so.

A hide is a hide and leather is leather

Robert Kanigel has the unusual title of professor of Scientific Writing at MIT in Boston and has taken a lifelong interest in leather and leather products. Now he has put the last few years aside for a really thorough study. He comes to the leather industry with an eclectic list of well received titles behind him, and some readers will have met him at events such as the 2004 centenary ALCA meeting in St. Louis, or in Italy skulking around the banks of the River Arno in Santa Croce and Ponte a Egola. The approach he adopts is to examine what consumers and tanners love about leather and what this really constitutes in emotional and technical terms. He then neatly intertwines this with a very thorough examination of



the many fakes and imitations that have come to market over the last two centuries.

To those readers who can still enjoy looking back over forty years in the industry fakes mean only thing—Corfam, a material brought to market by DuPont and introduced with major marketing muscle as the poromeric that would terminate leather's leading role in footwear. We know now that Corfam failed—it makes fascinating reading—and leather lived to tell the tale, but if Corfam did nothing else it pushed tanners into the late 20th century. This is not just in terms of better leathers but for the first time tanners began to accept that there were separate markets for fashion and performance leathers and paved the way for the industry to make natural aniline products with a fine touch and feel for one area and water resistance and dry soft leathers for the others.

Assaults on leather

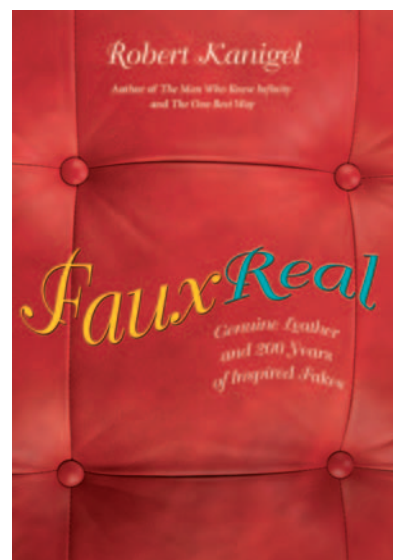
The assaults on leather have been many and various, from Leatherette in 1870 followed by Fabrikoid and today's more sophisticated synthetics which offer a much more realistic challenge to leather and yet they are accommodated by changing segmentation in the market place. The book also sheds light on the approach of Peta and puts it neatly into context between the fakes and real leather. This leads into a quite engaging section on the true value of 'natural' materials.

Kanigel notes that tanners struggle with leather's “sensual virtues” using terms such as “feel”, “hand”, and “handle” even before getting into greasy, draggy sticky or smooth. For tanners, words are part of the problem and all these tactile words come under the banner “organoleptic” which tanners probably associate more as a sensory term for wine than a technical term for leather. Nevertheless the studious will find UNIDO documents defining different aspects of the “organoleptic quality, viz. grain tightness, softness and fullness, tightness of bellies, grain draw, veininess, evenness of colour”.

Nowhere can these qualities be better identified than in Ponte a Egola where the book ends with an extended tour and discussion with the Genuine Italian Vegetable-Tanned Leather Consortium. Its determined approach to maintain the status of traditionally Italian tanned vegetable leathers and to market them strongly as natural materials clearly impresses the author. “For these Tuscan tanneries, these few hundred men and women, this one ancient, natural material bestows beauty, grants pleasure, cries for lasting life.”

All those involved in leather in whatever role will enjoy this book.

Published by Joseph Henry Press. 🌐



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