



Deck the walls

Leather wall panels are the latest thing to hit the luxury interiors market. Designer Genevieve Bennett uses thick leather hides to make beautiful floral and geometric pieces for the high-end home.



Design name: Starflower

ALL CREDITS: GENEVIEVE BENNETT

*Damask**Camelia**Deco*

Over the past decade, leather has become increasingly popular in the luxury home interiors sector. Alongside the ubiquitous fashionable pieces such as the classic Eames Lounge chair, leather also has made a name for itself in less likely interiors products such as tables and wall-panelling. London-based designer Genevieve Bennett is a leader in this trend and uses high quality leather to create hand-sculpted, beautifully decorative wall-panels, flooring, upholstery and furniture.

"I started using leather during my MA at the Royal College of Art," explains Ms Bennett. "I was working with paper creating sculptural pieces using paper engineering techniques and wanted to take it into other materials which also had a sculptural quality. I used thick leather and recycled plastics."

The designer was drawn to the versatility, durability and high value of leather and decided to explore different

ways of using the material to produce her designs. "I like the way you can use it like paper and card in a sculptural, three-dimensional way to create raised and sculpted effects," she says. "I also love the way you can engrave and emboss the surface to create texture and interest with pattern. This allows the pattern to become part of the material and therefore part of the room in a subtle way. I also enjoy the fact that it has a high value and therefore customers buy it as an investment for their home, for the long term, which is rewarding."

Made to order

After completing her Masters degree in 2000, Ms Bennett worked as a freelance designer, working on a variety of products from leather accessories for high end fashion designers, to trend and colour research and pattern design for interior products and accessories for companies including Habitat, Wedgwood, Tom Dixon

and Neisha Crosland. Three years ago, Ms Bennett launched the bespoke sculpted leather part of her business at interiors show 100% Design in London, and has been working with both private and commercial clients since.

In September this year, the designer launched a new range of leather wall and floor panels during London Design Week. "The collection focuses on inlaid, engraved, debossed and low relief techniques," she says. "There are seven new designs to be launched as well as two new sculpted designs."

This latest collection adds to the range Ms Bennett has been developing for the last three years, which comprises five simple floral and geometric designs which can be created in 26 colours. The designer is inspired by 18th century historical textile designs, as well as craftsmanship from earlier historical periods. "I love carved wood and stone work such as the work of 16th century



Harlequin



This close-up of the Harlequin design shows just how intricate the panels can be.

master craftsman Grinling Gibbons, plus paper sculpture and paper engineering techniques," she says.

Although finding a leather supplier who would sell in small quantities was initially problematic, Ms Bennett has been working closely with US-based upholstery leather provider Spinneybeck since 2008. "We have developed a range of engraved leather wall and floor tiles in beautiful belting leather," she says. "They added to the range this year with some stunning greys and taupes. I also work with several good Italian suppliers for the sculpted leather products."

The right type of leather

To be able to sculpt and manipulate the leather into her decorative pieces, Ms Bennett needs the leather to be relatively thick. "I also am always on the lookout for thicker leathers – between 2.8mm and 3.2mm," she says. "This is the thickness I need for the sculpted leather panels; any

thinner and it flops and the shapes do not hold."

Colour is also high on the designer's agenda, as bright, more vibrant shades that can be difficult to find are often popular with clients. "I love the unfinished natural look of veg-tanned and dyed aniline leather with no finish. But unusual brighter colours are also important," she says.

The bespoke sculpted leather panels are handmade by Ms Bennett in her London studio. "I cut and score the leather then work with excellent upholsterers to create the backgrounds, which I then hand stitch the motifs to, using hidden stitches," she says. "The designs that are engraved and embossed are initially hand drawn by myself, then I trace them on a computer, which can often takes days and days. Then this artwork is ready to be made into metal plates for the embossing, or to go for engraving which is done in the US. The designs are tested to check the

pressure needed to realise the design clearly if embossed, or in the case of engraving to provide an example of the colour the leather turns when the top layer is etched away."

Ms Bennett says her most exciting project since launching her business has been creating an engraved leather panel to celebrate the Formula One season at Silverstone earlier this year. "The brief was to combine the heritage of leather making in the area of Northampton and the unique nature of the F1 in a piece of artwork," she explains. "I took the shape of the track at Silverstone and created a dynamic graphic whereby it was repeated and looped over and over to give the impression of speed, momentum and competition. I engraved it into the surface of a beautiful thick white belting leather, mounted on a five centimetre deep leather-clad base. I really enjoyed the project and was delighted with the result." ☺