



The United Nude Cup is a sculptured heel piece which literally 'cups' the heel of a classic shoe or boot and acts as a backpiece.

CREDIT: UNITED NUDE



Beast to Beauty 2010

More sustainable leather

The third 'Leather - From Beast to Beauty' conference, organised by *World Leather* and specialist training consultancy *Leather Wise*, took place in London in June. Industry experts from all stages of the leather supply chain (from livestock to leathergoods) took to the stand throughout the course of the day to share their insights with delegates, but the main focus throughout was on producing leather in a more sustainable way. Main sponsors this year were the Scottish Leather Group and Pittards.



The United Nude Eamz is conceptually inspired by a furniture design classic; the Charles and Ray Eames chair.

CREDIT: UNITED NUDE

Shoe lifecycle questions

Prominent footwear designer Galahad Clark was the keynote speaker at Beast to Beauty 2010 and said immediately that he believes the shoe industry has to pay much more attention to product lifecycle management if it wants its sustainability credentials to be taken seriously.

The footwear sector has made too little progress in managing the lifecycle of its components and finished products, he says. Mr Clark, who is from the prominent footwear dynasty, says that industries such as mobile phones and electrical goods have gone much further in making sure they can reuse or recycle their products and the raw materials that go into them. Footwear, however, has an ongoing fight on its hands; women's high-heels that have metal shanks are just one reason why the lifecycle of a shoe and all its components can be long and challenging.

Focusing now on two shoe brands, Terra Plana and United Nude, Mr Clark places great emphasis on sustainable design, adapting the United Nations mantra of the three Rs: reduce, re-use and recycle. Examples include using no glue in some of his designs and instead stitching a sole straight onto a chrome-free leather upper.

"Every design, every product is part of the eco-system and needs to be balanced," he observes. "If not, it won't fit into the world of today and it will become extinct. Tonnes of shoes end up in landfill. This is

the eco-disaster of the shoe industry. We are part of a group that is studying ways to re-use or recycle shoes."

Shoe repairs

As well as giving shoes away, to people in the developing world, for example, you can re-use your own shoes by repairing them. In fact, repairability is going to be an increasingly important quality for shoes to have in the years ahead, so much so that Galahad Clark adds it as a fourth R.

Leather as a construction material can lend itself particularly well to this, he believes, because of its durability. However, he adds that where shoes are concerned we have a huge cultural challenge because, at the moment, repairs cost more than some new shoes. Credit where it's due—he gives low-cost retail chains praise for creating decent products that are "right on trend" at cheap prices.

For his own part, Mr Clark is keen on "emotionally durable design" and compares the lasting appeal good shoes can have to that of a pair of blue jeans. "People grow to love them," he says. "Everyone has a favourite pair of jeans, and lots of things, such as the way you sit or where you keep your wallet, will affect their look."

Reflecting his enthusiasm for all four Rs, Terra Plana and United Nude have developed their own eco-matrix (the lack of a genuine set of industry-wide guidelines is a recurring theme in footwear) with a commitment to reduce

waste at the heart of everything. In fact, the designer is so keen on reducing the amount of material his shoes consume, some of his creations, such as the Terra Plana Dopie (sandals, but in a "pure form"), are decidedly minimalist.

A dilemma

This represents something of a dilemma for Galahad Clark, considering his job and his family background; he thinks that shoes are "a poor second to feet". Parts of the world in which many people still go barefoot record the best foot health and fewest injuries, he says. One of his designs, the Vivo Barefoot, does its best to get back to nature with a very thin, puncture-proof sole. Thin soles are also a feature of some of the leather shoes for children in his collections.

He has drawn inspiration from Native American construction workers he has heard about. On receiving high-tech safety footwear to protect their feet at work, they took the boots home, sliced off the soles and stitched on soles they had made themselves from hide. "They wanted only natural leather between themselves and the earth, and I agree with them," Mr Clark explains.

This design minimalism is going to become more and more popular, he predicts, to the extent that, in five or ten years, padded running shoes will be widely regarded as "an ancient anomaly". Believing as he does that claims surrounding a shoe's ability to give us



greater shock absorption and motion control are “a pack of lies”, he thinks this is no bad thing.

He continues: “Modern materials and all these fandangos are leading us all down the garden path. If you run barefoot, you use your muscles more naturally and distribute the strain more evenly. If you watch children when they first learn to run, they stand upright, they take very short strides and bring the soles of their feet down first, almost directly under their bodies. This is right because all the elasticity and all the ligaments work naturally. Put some of these athletic shoes on them and children start heel-striking at a very early age.”

In spite of a shared conviction that some shoes can harm our health, he is no fan of the MBT or spin-offs such as the Reebok EasyTone, footwear with deliberately unstable soles. They can do more harm than good, he insists. Yes, they can tone up the buttocks, but this happens, according to Mr Clark, at the expense of the rest of the body being constantly “in panic”, putting the neck and the back at particular risk of injury. “They’re a bit of a menace,” he says. “I don’t think they’re healthy.”

Local production

In the brighter future he envisages, every pair of shoes will carry a list of ingredients, just like food products. Consumers will prefer locally made footwear and fair trade products will have a heyday. He acknowledges that Terra Plana and United Nude shoes are made in Asian factories at the moment, but a project to bring some Clark’s production back to the United Kingdom, albeit on a small scale, is under way. Small runs made in local factories that are switched on to developments such as rapid prototyping, the use of smart materials and so on can happen and can be successful in today’s market, he feels sure.

Anything more than small scale would be greatly ambitious for anyone in this still greatly labour-intensive industry. This is why Bangladesh has been the location of choice when the big manufacturing groups based in southern China have looked at expansion recently, he explains.

Sustainability is also a clear priority for the big footwear brands and the Asian manufacturers that are their key partners, but perhaps it’s inevitable that, the larger the organisation, the harder it is to implement a radical idea quickly. Small brands such as United Nude and Terra Plana, therefore, have an important voice in the sustainability and product lifecycle debate—even if the name behind them is one of the biggest in the footwear world.



Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier of Lanxess says the chemical industry must take the lead in helping the leather industry reduce its environmental impact.

CREDIT: WTP

Lanxess executive defends chrome

A senior figure in the leather business segment of specialty chemicals provider Lanxess spoke at the conference about the contribution companies like his can make to the drive among tanners to make the leather industry more sustainable.

Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier, vice-president of product development and product application for the Lanxess leather business, said greener chemicals were coming onto the market. He told the conference that green chemicals are products that are safer to handle, more efficient in producing the result expected of them during the tanning process, produce less waste, have a lower energy footprint, offer higher levels of biodegradability and recyclability, and use a higher proportion of natural raw materials in their composition.

Fatliquors, reactive tannins, some retanning agents, polyurethane finishes and some dyestuffs are good examples of products that chemicals manufacturers believe have potential to be made in a greener way, Dr Tegtmeier says, adding that about 70% of Lanxess’s research and development budget was devoted to helping its customers become more sustainable.

He also has a strong view on the ongoing debate over the relative green credentials of chrome and vegetable tanning agents. “We have to be careful in

rushing to judge,” he says. “All the alternatives have their own advantages and disadvantages but I think it is wrong to say that, from an eco perspective, vegetable tanning must be the best and chrome tanning the worst. For example, chrome is so effective, tanners can use it in much smaller quantities. You use a lot more volume of veg tannage to produce the leather. That’s important.”

He told the Beast to Beauty audience that about 80% of all the chemical products used in the tanning process are not present in finished leather, meaning they go into waste material. In the face of this, it is a good idea to try to do something else with the residue—reuse or recycle as much of it as possible, for example—but he insists that it is better to use less of the chemicals in the first place.

If some observers raise eyebrows at the use of chrome because it is a metal, Dr Tegtmeier’s response is that less than 5% of all the chrome in industrial use globally goes into leather, with 95% of it going into steel. “And steel is recycled, as everybody knows,” he said. “Chrome is the most recycled element in the Periodic Table.”

Eco potential

Leather has great potential to be “a true eco-product” if tanneries go about making it in what he regards as the right way, and he acknowledges that many tanneries are already on that road, carrying out environmental audits, taking part in



initiatives such as Tannery of the Year, the Leather Working Group and so on. The raw material (the beast, in the context of the conference) is 100% renewable and, in fact, turning hides and skins into a useful, flexible, durable and beautiful substrate does the meat industry a massive favour because, otherwise, the use of the material would be sorely limited and many of the millions of hides abattoirs are left with would have to go into landfill.

He points out that while, in his company's estimation, the global leather market has an annual value of around \$50 billion, tanneries are often run by small companies who are "squeezed in the manufacturing chain by giants". They have limited resources for research and development and, much of the time, focus instead on the quality of their leather. For this reason, he acknowledges that it is his area of business, the chemicals industry, that must take the lead in making leather greener, although he would like to see more of the brands that use large quantities of leather lend a hand, too.

All stakeholders should find a way to support "efficient scientific innovation", he concludes and to improve the environmental standards of leather production.

Often imitated, never equalled

The next speaker was Steven Jessep, chief executive of Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP), a non-profit, factory certification group. WRAP certifies factories to a 12-point code of conduct covering many aspects of corporate social responsibility. His subject was the value of leather compared to synthetic substitutes in the sustainability stakes.

For Steven Jessep, sustainability means meeting the needs of the current generation, with regard to making a living, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. An economy that delivers this will be one that is "in equilibrium" and has "an ecological support system". Leather fits into this well, he believes, because it is from a sustainable source.

"Synthetic leather, sometimes called 'pleather', is plastic, it comes from oil," he says, "as do the varnishes and coatings. That's the basic truth. Synthetic leather is a pretty nasty by-product of the industry that has been spewing oil into the Gulf of Mexico for months, and these materials stay around. Studies have shown that styrofoam can take 4,000 years to break down."

The world's population is increasing and



WRAP chief executive, Steven Jessep (right) at the recent Tannery of the Year awards in Hong Kong, where he was one of the judges.

CREDIT: WTP

at current rates, remaining reserves are likely to last even less time than the oil we consumed to reach the peak in, he reckons, 2004 or 2005. His analogy is that we had a pie to eat. We have eaten half and the half that is left is all there is for the future generations of our families; the more we consume, the less there will be for them. "That's what has happened with oil," he continues. "We're going to be riding horses again, so we'll need bridles and saddles!"

He says this partly tongue in cheek, but whether the prediction comes true or not, he is sure that leather will continue to be an important commodity. "Leather is one of the oldest and most sustainable materials on the planet. That's why when we see cave paintings the people in them are wearing hides and skins and it's one of the reasons why, as consumers today, so many of us choose to buy leather shoes. It's a material that has an honourable history and a fabulous future."

On display

As in other years, a large group of design students from different fashion colleges around the UK, 19 young designers in total, attended Beast to Beauty this year, thanks to the financial assistance of the Leathersellers' Company in London. They displayed their work in a room next to the conference hall to give delegates the chance to see their creations

and talk to the students during breaks. The exhibits included shoes, bags, briefcases and clothes.

For the second year running, Italian tannery Conceria Prealpina, presented a cash prize to one of the students. Prealpina managing director, Giancarlo Baldisserotto, carefully reviewed all the work on display and picked out the participant whose pieces particularly pleased and interested him.

All 19 students were already winners as their work had won them a place at the event courtesy of the generous help of the industry's livery company in the City of London. But Giancarlo Baldisserotto chose a display by Sarah Jane Williams from the London College of Fashion as 'the best in show' and, at the start of the afternoon session of the conference, presented her with a cash prize from Prealpina to help her take her work forward.

Ms Williams makes traditional leather brief- and attaché cases in British style, but with a real design twist. One side of the main case she had on display, in light tan leather, was straight on one side, with a traditional lock. It has two separate handles in the centre. From there, though, the shape of the case changes completely, with the young designer incorporating a "tapering curve" into the body. She describes the overall effect as giving "a melted organic form" to a traditional object.



Her collection includes a number of other pieces, including a jewellery case and a picnic hamper. Another of the briefcases is L-shaped and comes in peppermint green coloured leather. It looks like it would fit into a James Bond film.

Giancarlo Baldisserotto told *World Leather* after the presentation that he knew Ms Williams's briefcase was the winning display as soon as he saw it. He commented: "All the work the students have produced is excellent. But there is something very particular and original about this design. It's something I have never seen anywhere before, and in Italy, as you know, there is a lot of emphasis on design, with new design ideas always on show. This idea is new."

He went on to say that, as manufacturing continues to move to lower-cost countries, it is increasingly ideas that matter. "We need to encourage our students and young designers to keep developing original ideas," he said.

There was a wide array of creative thinking on display throughout the day. Other examples were shoes made by Northampton student Josh Cook who won



Admiring the students' display of work at Beast to Beauty 2010.

CREDIT: WTP

the support of famous footwear brand Church to make his collection of men's shoes and boots, mostly in suede, with his favourite colour, purple, prominent. But he also had two pairs of baby shoes to hand, a design idea with which Church was not, initially, able to help him.

He had been attracted to the idea of first shoes for children for some time but had no last to work with as it's a category Church doesn't touch. By chance, on a visit to London one weekend, Josh Cook's mother found an ancient wooden last of around the right size at a flea market. She quickly snapped it up for him, allowing him to have an up-to-date replica made and complete the construction of the shoes. As a final happy coincidence, he related that the baby who will wear the shoes, his girlfriend's new nephew, had been born just the night before Beast to Beauty.

Equally impressive was the attention to detail that had gone into a super sheepskin coat made by fellow Northampton student Garry Butterfield. The coat has vents cut into the back in a special design with a laser-cutter to give the material some stretch. He worked with Easirider, a

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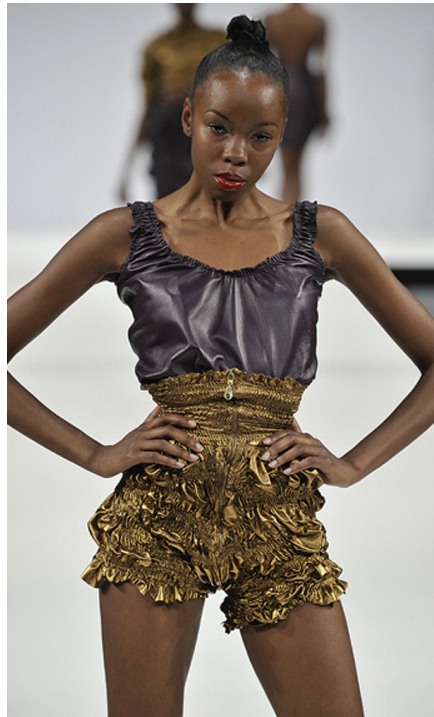


specialist sheepskin upholstery provider that has become something of a legend in Northampton and has developed from that an interest in working with sheepskin on customised car interior projects. But let's hope that the coat on display at Beast to Beauty, which had wool on and a lovely natural look, is far from the last Garry Butterworth makes.

Fellow Northampton student Emma Curtis has also worked hard on leather apparel for her final collection, creating tops, skirts, trousers and dresses with a characteristic look reminiscent of sixteenth century ruffs, with ruffles and wrinkles producing an unusual and interesting shape. Interested originally in designing loose-fitting clothes, Ms Curtis found ways of using leather to add volume.

Other applications

Presentations from Dr Warren Bowden of the Scottish Leather Group on his company's new thermal energy plant, from Dr Gordon Paul on the use his company, Devro, makes of meat by-products (to make millions of metres of sausage skins a



Part of Emma Curtis's leather clothing collection.

CREDIT: CHRISTOPHER MOORE LIMITED

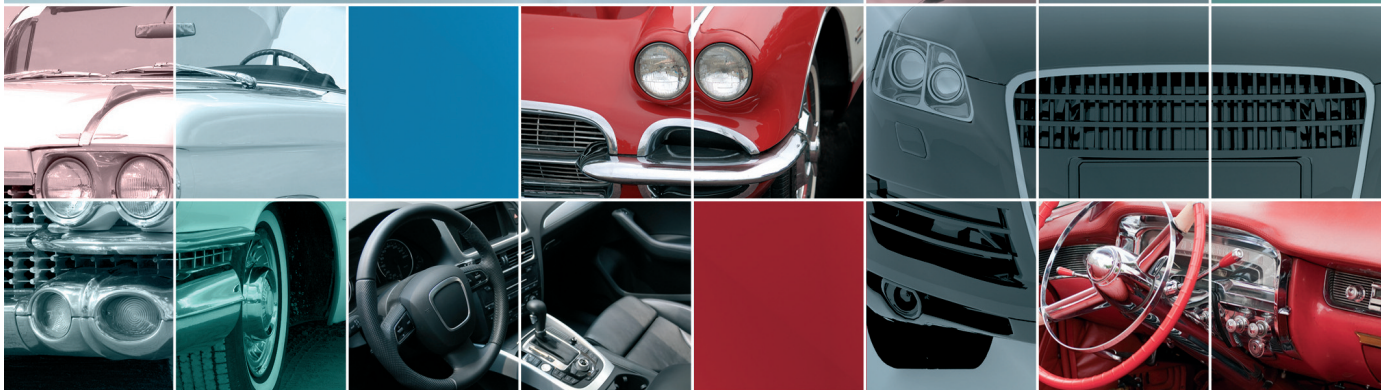
year), from Dr Paula Antunes of the University of Northampton on applications in the health and beauty industry, from Dr Phil Hadley from the English Beef and Lamb Executive.

On the relationship between the meat industry and livestock farmers, from Reg Hankey, chief executive of tanning group Pittards and Mike Redwood, explaining a new campaign idea called Leather; Naturally completed the programme for the day. Across the board, the third Beast to Beauty offered delegates an interesting day's discussion and education in the delightful surroundings of the Saddlers' Hall in the City of London.

That same evening, many of the delegates attended a gala dinner at the nearby Leathersellers' Hall, at which the president of the UK's Society of Leather Technologists and Chemists, Christine Ohren-Bird, gave an entertaining after-dinner talk about her experiences as a woman in the leather industry. Each of the 19 students invited to Beast to Beauty then received a commemorative certificate from the Master of the Leathersellers' Company, Charles Barrow. ☺

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