



Focus on: The Carbon Footprint of Leather

Gucci's Bamboo bag, the first product made with its new heavy-metal-free tanning process

CREDIT: KERING



Kering's sharing

The French luxury group has been working on two novel tanning methods for three years for its Gucci and Bottega Veneta brands, and says it is almost ready to offer the chrome-free and heavy-metal-free developments to the industry.

The chief executive of luxury group Kering, François-Henri Pinault, has said his company will make two new tanning methods for producing “more sustainable” leather available to the entire industry.

Giving a keynote speech at the 2014 *New York Times* International Luxury Conference in Miami, Mr Pinault said two of the group's brands, Gucci and Bottega Veneta, had been working for three years on specific projects to improve tanning processes.

Following collaborative development with suppliers in the tanning industry in Tuscany and with a university in Germany,

Gucci has pioneered a method to remove all heavy metals from the tanning process and Bottega Veneta has developed a chrome-free tanning process.

“Both approaches have been made without compromising on [finished] product quality,” Mr Pinault said. “They also generate a significant reduction in water use, and energy consumption is also decreased because the new processes take less time to complete. We will be making this know-how available to everyone, including our competitors, as we want Kering to lead the way.”

He confirmed that Kering intends to share on an open-source



Craftspeople at Bottega Veneta, which has developed a chrome-free tanning process with its Italian tannery partners.

CREDIT: BOTTEGA VENETA

platform the work its brands and their partners have done on developing these new tanning processes. “We are still implementing the new techniques in the Gucci production of leather. We have reached more than 20% of the total volume and, as soon as it’s stabilised, we will give it to anyone who wants to use it.”

He said that Kering began looking at ways of making tanning processes more sustainable three or four years ago and consulted widely among tanners and leather chemical suppliers about the possibilities of keeping the qualities and appearance of leather the same without using heavy metals. “The answer was, ‘it’s impossible, it’s never been done’,” Mr Pinault said. “The reality was that no research into this had ever been carried out. We took up the challenge with Bottega Veneta and Gucci to work with the university in Germany and with our suppliers and we found exactly what we were looking for.”

Traceability

Leather, its footprint and traceability are part of wider sustainability targets set by the group in 2013 which state “100% of leather will be from responsible and verified sources that do not result in converting sensitive ecosystems into grazing lands or agricultural lands for food production for livestock” by 2016. This means tracing its entire supply chain; a tricky proposition.

After “improving understanding of the movement of raw hides and tanned leather through the complex supply chain” it admitted “it is difficult for the tannery to know the exact source of hides they are purchasing”.

An environmental profit-and-loss report showed 70% of the leather’s carbon footprint impact is in tier four – cattle ranching and farming – but the “relatively small value that leather represents in the meat supply chains means it is challenging to influence ranching and rearing practices”. Gucci’s ‘zero deforestation’ handbag launched in 2013 using leather from Rainforest Alliance-certified cattle ranges “proved that sustainable leather production is possible” around the Amazon.

“It is imperative that the leather and meat industry work

together to provide traceability options for hides and promote more sustainable practices,” said Kering. After the research, it updated its leather sourcing guidelines to include requirements on supply chain traceability, certification, livestock feed, ecological sustainability and animal welfare, and joined cross-sector groups to “help influence and improvise the sustainability of the leather trade more broadly”. It follows the general principle that leather accounts for between 8% and 10% of the carbon footprint of cattle.

It has also been working with consultants and the Sustainable Luxury Working Group since 2013 to “identify opportunities to enhance the sustainability of bovine leather sourcing” for its luxury and sport & lifestyle brands, which include Puma, Cobra and Volcom as well as Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Saint Laurent and Balenciaga.

Luxury division

Most of the group’s leather comes from beef cattle, in particular from France, while the majority of finished products in the luxury division are made in Italy with leather sourced through two group-owned tanneries, one of which is Blutonic in Santa Croce sull’Arno, where it has pioneered the heavy metal-free tanning process. Details of the exact nature of the process are secret for the time being, aside from that it uses plant-based



François-Henri Pinault has offered the group’s R&D on tanning to its rivals.

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tanning agents. Given the chrome-free and plant-based tanning processes currently available, it will be interesting to learn what new process Kering is developing.

Gucci launched the Bamboo bag – the first products made with the new tanning process – in 2013 and is now making 20% of leather volume in this way. Through Blutonic, it is also advancing its traceability goals; currently testing a new tool set up in conjunction with its 'Made In' to trace all the hides that go through the tannery. Once working successfully, this will be rolled out to other tanneries to enable traceability of 90% of Gucci's hides by early 2015 and 100% traceability by 2016.

Bottega Veneta has embarked on a similar transparency project for sheepskin. Working with the Russo di Casandrino tannery in Italy, the University of Padova and certification body ICEC, the pilot scheme is certifying bags from the farm, through production and transportation, to retail. Customers receive a certificate mapping the full journey. "This is an innovative approach for the European sheep leather industry," states Kering, adding that this tool will also be offered to its rivals, should they want it, to help improve responsible sourcing.

On a smaller scale, both Gucci and Bottega have, over the past year, turned leather cuttings into fertiliser by applying a process that breaks the leather down into a biodegradable product. More than 200 tonnes of fertiliser have been produced by this method, while Gucci has also started using crocodile cuttings from handbag production to make shoes.

Materials Innovation Lab

Mr Pinault admits that for individual brands to make leaps towards sustainability and transparency is difficult, constrained as they are by the "relentless rhythm of the collections". This was the reason for setting up the Milan-based Materials Innovation Lab, which worked on the two new tanning processes and into which the brands feed their own research.

"You cannot develop new materials in a few months," he says. "That's why we work with brands to take the research to group level to make it a reality. It's important that when a brand is mature enough you have teams looking at longer cycles, not just the fashion cycles, and for smaller or mid-size companies that it's

A number of Kering's brands have LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for buildings and renovations.

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taken over by the group, to make sure you do achieve innovation in these areas.

"When it comes to luxury, technology in the manufacturing processes is not as important as it is in other industries: we cannot be an industry driven by volume, we're here for great materials, great creativity and great craftsmanship. However, when it comes to the product, new technology can create new kinds of materials, giving new fields of expression for designers or craftsman. This is what luxury is about." 🌱



Kering and the International Union for Conservation of Nature are collaborating to improve the sustainability of the python trade.

CREDIT: GUCCI