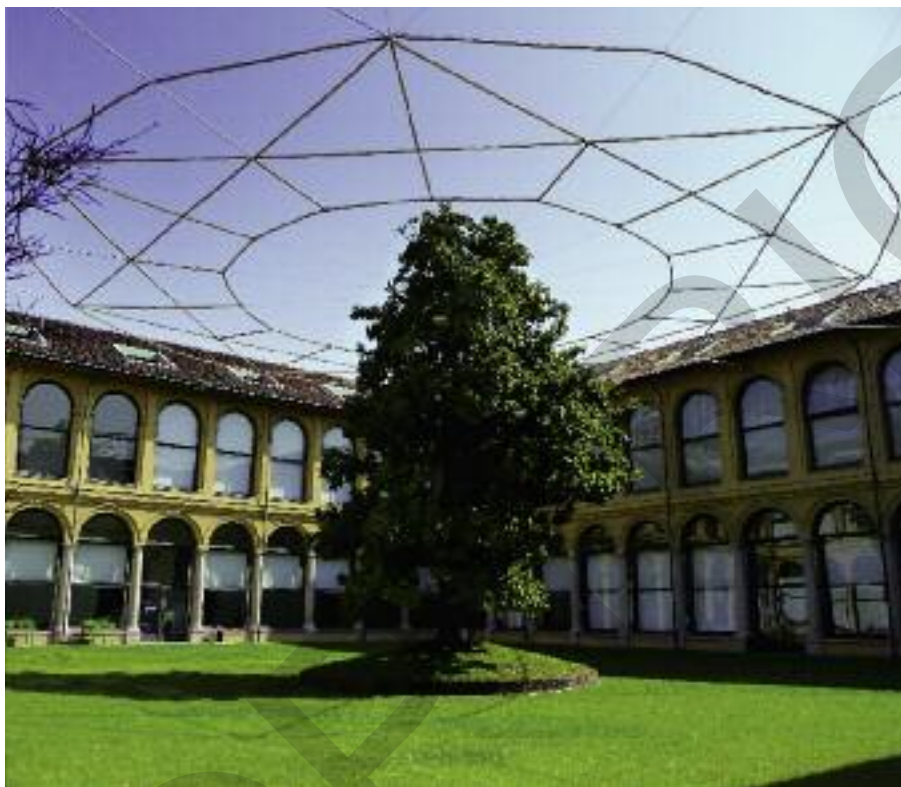




Global industry meets for Milan congress

On behalf of the International Council of Tanners (ICT), Italy's tanning industry association, UNIC, organised an industry congress in Milan in September. Under the title Trends And Future Challenges, the event attracted some 400 delegates from around the world.



The Palazzo delle Stelline in Milan, the venue for the leather industry congress in September.
CREDIT: ILDA CASATI

A highly diverse programme at a major industry congress organised by the ICT in Milan in September included presentations on the situation of the leather industry in a number of countries and regions. These included Germany, Taiwan, the US, Brazil, China, Italy, the UK, Turkey, Portugal, Mexico, South Africa and the COMESA region of eastern and southern Africa.

Later, there were detailed presentations on meat demand (from farmer and global meat industry analyst Richard Brown), hide availability, developments in tanning machinery and in leather chemistry (from the executive secretary of the International Union of Leather Technologists' and

Chemists' Societies, IULTCS, Dr Campbell Page), as well as talks on consumer demand for leather and on innovations in consumer-facing technology.

Call for common sense on chrome

Addressing delegates, ICT president Rino Mastrotto said he felt the tanning industry was in danger of "going too far" to meet demands in areas such as environmental management that, he claimed, come more from media or lobby groups than from consumers. He gave the example of customer organisations taking tanners to task over their use of chrome. "I'm talking about chrome III," Mr

Mastrotto insisted, "not chrome VI. Without any facts or scientific support, some are asking us to abandon chrome III when between 82% and 85% of the leather in the world is tanned using chrome III. We are losing our common sense and we need to get it back, for the sake of all the stakeholders in the leather value chain."

Speaking after this, Carlo Corazza, head of the Tourism, Creative and Emerging Industries unit in the European Commission's directorate general for Growth, said he felt Brussels had "not paid enough attention" to the leather industry and that the leather sector would benefit from a decrease in protectionism in some markets around the world and better policies on labels of origin on finished goods, but he acknowledged that even in the European Union, it is difficult to reach consensus on these matters.

Link between technology and sustainability

Gabriella Marchioni Bocca, president of Italian tanning machinery industry association Assomac, was another leading industry figure who addressed the congress. She pointed out that her member companies are responsible for 70% of the exports in the tanning machinery sector and have shipped equipment to a collective total of 140 countries around the world. Ms Marchioni Bocca, chief executive of Turin-based splitting band knife manufacturer Lamebo, said disseminating technological innovation was Assomac's main aim and insisted that efforts to provide technology that can help tanners around the world improve their performance in sustainability was an increasingly important part of the association's role.

Challenge of bringing in young workers

Among the regional perspectives



Presentations covered developments in meat demand, hide availability, tanning machinery and leather chemistry, as well as detailed reports on the industry situation in many countries and regions around the world. CREDIT: ICT



The ICT attracted 400 delegates from all parts of the global leather industry to its congress in Milan in September. CREDIT: ICT

presented at the congress, the presentation from Leather Industries of America also came from a woman, current chair Lisa Howlett, the president of specialist leather shoelace producer Auburn Leather. Ms Howlett told the audience that she is proud to be a fifth-generation tanner and said the body that represents the leather industry in the US, originally called the Tanners' Council, will celebrate its centenary in 2017. LIA has 24 "leather members", either tanners or US-based finished product companies that consume large amounts of leather. Ms Howlett mentioned that her association was very pleased to add tanning group ISA's new TanTec facility in Vicksburg, Mississippi to the list. "It's the first new tannery to be built in the US for 65 years," she explained. LIA also has "general members", who are suppliers of chemicals

and other goods and services to US tanners. One concern that Lisa Howlett outlined centres on the industry's aging workforce in the US. "This is a major challenge," she said.

"At least in the US, we don't have a good system for training the new folks coming up. It's hard to get technical individuals into the US [from other countries] to work for the long term. Many of us are older and will be looking for retirement in the next 10 or 15 years. We need to find a way to interest young people in the leather industry in the US and train those people so that our maturing industry does not retire with us." She pointed to growth in the sector: in 2012, US tanners exported finished leather with a value of \$1.2 billion, and wet blue with a value of \$647 million. By 2014, those figures had become \$1.8

billion for finished leather and \$1 billion for wet blue.

World Leather covers elsewhere in this issue the information that the China Leather Industry Association shared in Milan and will report in detail in the December-January issue on the contributions African industry leaders made.

Success factors for Germany (and Austria)

Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier, well known throughout the industry for his work at leather chemicals manufacturer Lanxess and within IULTCS, spoke on this occasion on behalf of German leather industry association VDL, whose president, Thomas Strebost, joint managing director of Heller-Leder, was unable to travel to the congress. Dr Tegtmeier told delegates that the extensive consolidation that began to occur in the German leather industry in the 1970s came to a halt at the start of this century and that a core of high-performing tanners remains. "Today we can count a total of 14 medium- and large-sized enterprises with 2,000 employees, processing roughly 2.5 million hides per year," he explained. "We have the finest raw material in the world, giving very high yields."

Other success factors he pointed to included a commitment among German tanners to good environmental management (with examples such as turning tannery waste into biogas, that Dr Tegtmeier believes will become critically important for the tanning sector over the next 15 or 20 years), and the ongoing provision there of professional training and education of young tanners, formerly at Reutlingen and now at FILK in Freiberg, supported by important research institutes, as well as the "network of experts" brought to the leather supply chain by major leather chemical companies. He suggested that all these factors have combined to help VDL member companies excel in the Tannery of the Year programme, with Josef Heinen winning a Highly Commended award for Europe in 2010, Heller Leder being named global Tannery of the Year in 2011 and Wollsdorf Leather (an Austrian company, but also a member of VDL) repeating that feat in 2014.

ICT secretary, Paul Pearson, said at the close of the congress that the organisation intends to hold similar events in the future, giving September 2017 as the likely date for the next one and Shanghai as the likely venue. ●