



The 33 chair in Modern Saddle leather, which Moore & Giles designed in partnership with North Carolina furniture manufacturers.

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In a different league

A decision to stop supplying leather for footwear and move into furniture was a matter of economic necessity for Moore & Giles. A quarter of a century on, the US Virginia-based stockist of high-end upholstery leather has cemented a prominent place for itself in the furniture market. It is now playing its part in educating new generations of furniture brands and designers in the beauty and benefits of leather.

Moore & Giles is one of only a few leather companies left in Virginia and it has survived, according to company president, Sackett Wood, precisely because it reinvented itself 25 years ago, moved out of footwear (of which Virginia was an important producer in the twentieth century) into furniture. It's been successful enough for rival suppliers of leather now to refer to Moore & Giles as "operating in a different league" and to have its own director of education, Whitney Tinsley, who has set up her own education course in leather, which now has external accreditation.

The company works closely with hand-picked partner tanneries in Germany, Spain, Italy, Colombia, India, South Korea, Thailand, Brazil, New Zealand and France and holds three million square-feet of finished leather in stock at its headquarters at Forest, Virginia, which it sells to customers inside and outside the US. It's happy working with a wide range of tanners, taking, it says, only truly special articles, the best that each can offer. "Leather is like small-batch whiskey or fine food," Mr Wood says, "and food is different everywhere you go. What you eat in Spain is different from what you eat in Thailand, and so on. That's what happens

with leather too and that's how we have put our range together." He says that making the move into furniture was something of a gamble but one that paid off. He was in the Mandarin Hotel in Hong Kong one day and saw an old leather upholstered chair and said 'that's what I want to sell'. It's not an easy transition, but the company has achieved it with some style.

An impression on the market

Soon after deciding to enter the furniture market, the company embarked on advertising campaigns in House Beautiful and other high-end consumer publications. This expensive investment paid off, Sackett Wood says, because in time furniture designers and manufacturers began to say that a label on a product confirming that the leather was from Moore & Giles would help secure a sale. He thinks this has hints of the benefits automotive tanner Connolly Leather achieved at one time through its tie-in with Rolls-Royce Motors.

More recently, Moore & Giles has begun to offer its own brand of bags, briefcases, small leathergoods and belts, plus leather for other applications, including aviation, marine and



automotive, but furniture for residential and for hospitality environments remains a key focus. Working side by side with the high-end furniture manufacturers that the US still has in states such as North Carolina, it has also designed a small furniture range of its own, comprising one style of sofa and three styles of armchair. The chairs in this range are the 33 chair, the Jefferson Street chair and the Traynham chair, which pairs with the Traynham sofa. Leathers on offer to cover these pieces are articles called Sonoma Toffee, Modern Saddle and Madrid Spice. The frames are made from North American woods such as maple and walnut, but the leather comes from Europe.

Parisian appeal

This project began with the 33 chair, which the company calls a tailored, modern version of a traditional Parisian club chair, describing it as a study in contrasts: compact but comfortable; inviting yet stately; fashionable and traditional. The leather the company chose for the 33 is vegetable-tanned in Tuscany, and it comes in limited quantities. Each hide takes up to 60 days to take from raw material to finished article and customers are reminded from the outset that the finished leather will burnish over the course of the chair's life, which only adds to the product's considerable beauty. Since each hide is subtly different, the Virginia-based company and its Italian partners hand-selected hides and put them into complementary groups, which, when the leather goes onto the chair's wooden frame, showcases the unique characteristics of each. The intensive process of creating each chair necessarily limits the quantity available but they look great in pairs, the company insists, and arranging several of them together will create what it calls an arresting tableau over which to appreciate "the subtle variations of the leather".

There are plenty of bright colours across the ranges, too, which the amethyst, tangerine, daffodil, orchid and persimmon options in the Mont Blanc range show. However, the company likes to focus on the hand of its leathers too and says this is making a big impression on furniture brands and on consumers. "We have been very focused on the texture or feel of our leather," marketing vice-president, Daryl Calfee, says, "because no one can match it."

Education programme

These detailed descriptions tell you all you need to know about Moore & Giles's devotion to leather; one look at the chairs and sofa would probably be enough. To share this love with the world, it has set up its own leather education programme and appointed Whitney Tinsley as its education director. Ms Tinsley was working for Moore & Giles as a merchandiser. One day a furniture company visited company headquarters and said afterwards to Sackett Wood that he had enjoyed talking to Ms Tinsley so much he was thinking of offering her a job. He recalls: "I didn't think she would take it, but I said that it would be good for her professional development to go through an interview process. She came back from the interview and said she thought she was going to take up the offer. So she spent four years on the road selling leather furniture and then went to Maine to be creative director at Tasman Leather Group for another four years and when she was ready to come home to Virginia, she had all this knowledge and experience and we were able to create the role of director of education for her."



Moore & Giles is happy to be a pioneer with its Olive Green range of leathers, calling them the most sustainable leathers available.

Ms Tinsley herself says she looks back on her time at Tasman Leather very fondly; she enjoyed the hands-on aspect of learning to make leather from start to finish, but she clearly loves her role now. "We offer the course free of charge," she explains, "to be able to go into companies and talk to their design teams about leather. I wrote it using resources from esteemed industry figures such as Covington and Sharpouse and some of the Nothing To Hide essays. I designed it to deliver it in person, but we've developed an online platform for it too. It's 'Leather 101', if you like, covering the history of leather manufacturing and then the process, from raw material to finished leather. And now I'm working on a second course that will go into more detail about the different types of leather."

She explains that the Moore & Giles course is an asset for members of design teams in furniture companies and other customer organisations because it can help them fulfil a need for Continuing Education Unit credits. Organisations including the American Society of Interior Designers and the International Interior Design Association have recognised the course in this capacity. Ms Tinsley continues: "I'm trying to teach designers that, even for furniture in high-traffic areas, such as public spaces in which a lot of different people will sit



Colour is important at Moore & Giles, as this emerald leather from its Mont Blanc range in a chair from furniture brand Wesley Hall proves. But the company cares about hand too.

on the chairs and sofas they make, they can use natural leather. I think there's a disconnect; the automotive industry has driven consumers and designers to think material is better if it's completely covered in finish."

Olive leather pioneers

Sackett Wood makes no apologies for concentrating on higher-end leather rather than on "cookie-cutter products" and he is proud to be a pioneer user of leather made using the olive-based wet-green process developed in Germany in recent years. Moore & Giles is also sourcing olive leather from Spain, but the process is the same. It currently has three Olive Green collections, called Terra, Aspen and Eden. Mr Wood says he loves the smell of these articles because it reminds him of a humidifier. And although he senses that the market is slower to embrace what his company is calling "the most sustainable leather available" than he would like, he's convinced the idea is worth persevering with. He points out that it is a concept that works well with the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification programme for buildings. This programme for certifying buildings as having a low impact on the environment is becoming increasingly popular in the US, with communities close to the Moore & Giles headquarters, such as Arlington County, Virginia, and Washington DC, in the vanguard.

Property companies and businesses are keen to have the buildings they produce and occupy LEED certified, in the construction and in the design. The interior environment of the building is important and designers' material choices can help a project earn LEED points. "Olive Green leather works for that," Sackett Wood explains. This range of leathers comes exclusively from fresh south German hides tanned in

Europe with mineral-free wet-green technology. In the wet-green process, the tanning extracts are made by brewing leaves that fall naturally from olive trees. Because the leaves, which have traditionally just been burned, are a by-product from the olive and olive oil industry and the hides are a by-product from the meat industry, olive-tanned leather takes the sustainability of the range to new levels, Moore & Giles believes. "Olive Green leathers are expensive," Mr Wood concludes, "but we are happy to put money into them because we know they will sell." 🌿



A chair covered in Moore & Giles's Burnham leather from High Point-based furniture brand Thayer Coggin.