

The evolution of garment leathers

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In the mind of the general public, there are two distinct concepts about leather clothing. On the one hand, leather is often thought of as being functional, based on the concept of the ability to protect, insulate and provide warmth. On the other hand there is the perception of it being luxurious, fashionable and stylish.

For example, if associated with motorcyclists there is the concept of heavy protection, with bovine leathers used almost exclusively to provide strength and durability. In fashion wear, there are beautifully designed and crafted leather clothes for both men and women. In this situation the coats, jackets, trousers, waistcoats and skirts are normally made from the lightest of goat and sheepskins dyed and finished in the latest fashionable colours.

Only some articles are viewed as both fashionable and functional, such as clothing made from double face sheepskins. In this case the wool lining ensures that the garment is comfortable and warm to wear, and the suede or dressed outer surface can be finished to produce an infinite variety of textures and tactile surfaces. The wool lining, cuffs and collar can be dyed in single tones or multicoloured to complement the overall style and colour of the garment.

Matching new perceived images

People have become accustomed to the comfort of many of the lightweight alternative materials. Vast numbers of technical benefits are promised in terms of wear performance by the myriad of synthetic materials - including breathability, abrasion resistance, water resistance and low density. Almost all are machine washable, have good insulation, high colour fastness, and are available in a broad and brilliant colour range. They all carry so many swing tags on the garment at the point of sale that few would doubt the authenticity of the manufacturer's warranty.

Against this background the demand for leather clothing seems to have diminished in recent years. Whether this is due to market saturation during its heyday, or people becoming bored with the comparatively small range of colours and styles and limited end use applications, or a combination of these factors is not clear. Other factors may be price as quality leather tends to be expensive, or the throw-away culture in which consumers buy clothes to last just a few months until the next fashion comes along. Leather tends to last a lot longer than this and therefore has a different role to play in the wardrobe.

Modern outdoor lifestyles also require garments that present a sportive image, even when the wearer is in his or her twilight years. People are living longer, and there is a growing market in



this highly fashionable sporty segment in which leather currently seems to have little place.

Can this be true? Can leather meet the requirements of a public that perceives a need to generate a "fitness for ever" image?

When watching sport on TV, people see their heroes wearing purpose designed high tech body coverings. These have been cut in distinctive and individual colour combinations and are emblazoned with logos from famous sportswear manufacturers and/or from sports sponsors. Are any of these brands using leather in their broad range of products of which the general public is so familiar? The answer is very few.

In turn this means that leather does not have the same exposure to achieve the broad appeal of the synthetic textile materials that have become synonymous with these famous sporting names. There are, of course, exceptions such as motorcycling or golf, but when the most popular sporting events are soccer, rugby, athletics, baseball, tennis and cricket, the clothing is not going to be made from leather at the present time.

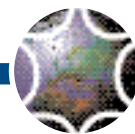
Can the sportive link be captured to enhance the image and demand for leather?

Most of today's technical properties required for clothing leathers can be developed to equal those of man-made alternatives. High levels of colour fastness, breathability and water resistance can be achieved. Leather garments can be light in weight, comfortable to wear, and made from intensely dyed shades having good fastness properties.

So what is missing? Do we need the backing of top fashion designers to promote the material or superstars to stimulate a demand? Or are there other ways that the image of leather can be made more attractive to the consumer?

And there is the issue of price when compared with other materials that can be purchased in rolls and cut into components with a minimal amount of wastage. This factor is unlikely to change.

The exception is, of course, the luxury end of the market where garments are being sold to more affluent people who have less regard for the price. Here, leather is accepted as a mark of luxury. Garments can be given the individuality that the customer desires. They will be elegant to wear and will feel delightfully soft.



Working with the garment designer

For the consumer, the advantages of leather lie in its appearance and tactile properties. With the exception of garments used for protection, the colour, feel, texture and surface appearance are nearly always more important than outright performance. There will be an emphasis on softness and on the lightness that is achieved with the type of leather usually associated with clothing. These factors give leather the eye-catching look that is so necessary for the special occasion, for evening wear, for something that is different and for something that has the distinctive mark of fashion.

For the tanner, the advantages lie in his or her ability to process and finish small batches relatively quickly. Multiple batches of garment leathers can be processed and finished separately in different colours while employing the same mechanical operations. This is especially so when using modern process technology coupled with products for wet end, dyeing and finishing that are available from world wide companies which are geared so strongly towards achievement of softness, upgrading and naturalness of the finished leather.

The application of dedicated compact polymers and syntans in retanning and the use of combinations of soft resins, compact finishes and cationic products are just some of the ways in which



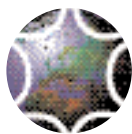
life has been made easier for the tanner and finisher of garment leathers. Virtually the whole range of finishing products is based on aqueous formulations containing almost no solvents and certainly no chemicals that are currently known to present health hazards to the finisher, to the manufacturer or to the wearer of the finished garment.

Equally important is the compatibility of the products used at the processing, dyeing and finishing stages of leather production. The characteristics being created—the softness, feel and appearance imparted to the leather—benefit from beginning to end of the manufacturing process from products known to be compatible. Applications laboratories across the world have developed a high level of synergy and team work amongst their technicians, and this is reflected in the way in which processing and finishing systems can be

formulated to work together and produce the leather that is acceptable to the garment designer.

Adapting and responding to changing demands

This is not the end of the story. Fashion demands can and do change quickly. Tanneries need to react very quickly to these changes if they are not to miss out on today's round of fashion



and the profits that are to be gained from it.

Leather for garment applications has the big advantage that it can be made in small individual batches. It can effectively be made to order. If the tannery can be flexible and make instant changes to the surface design of its leather, then so too must the manufacturer of these processing and finishing products be equally adaptable. Small batches of leather may require that the products are packaged in small quantities. Colour requirements may change quickly and this may rely either on in-house colour matching experts or on the expertise of suppliers to mix colour quickly and accurately for delivery to the tannery in ready-to-use formulations. Close communication and understanding between technicians preparing product and system formulations at both the tannery and the product supplier are essential if optimal efficiency is to be achieved.

Flexibility goes even further than this. Each customer buying from an individual tannery will have different requirements. The

world of garment leathers is led by fashion and by changes in fashion. Here the ease of finishing garment leathers becomes really important. Lightweight, soft leathers can be finished in unique surface designs and colours to suit individual customer requirements. Small batches and flexibility of manufacturing procedures ensures that the tannery finishes its leather to individual requirements and deliver in the shortest possible time. Everyone benefits.

Technical innovations

As fashion moves on from one season to another it is driven by a sense of creativity. Design is not just the shape of a dress and its cut, it includes form, colour, surface effects, feel and many other attributes that come together to create a garment and make it saleable.

Where do these ideas come from? Nature itself provides many of the ideas, particularly those associated with the use of different shades and colours and the ways in which they are used to tone together or to vividly contrast. In this field nature provides many lessons in the use of stimulating colour and surprising texture combinations.

However, there are other sources of inspiration. Art and artists have always affected fashion. The colour palettes and the ways in which artists use colour and design to produce their work may affect the way a fashion designer is thinking. Minimalist colours and minimalist designs for clothing and for decor are one fashion that comes to mind.



And innovative technology has created new surface effects for industry that have been adapted for fashion. The brushed look created on metal surfaces such as aluminium, stainless steel and polished metals. The sometimes stark colours and shapes of plastics, and the new laser effects, together with the ways in which these can be placed side by side to create stunning appearances have all made fashion designers create new merchandise. In turn these have encouraged tanners and the suppliers of processing and finishing products to think of how they can use their technology and products to develop these ideas.

Creativity and innovation in marketing

Some effects have become possible over the last few years, but others are very recent. These include laser designs, digital design transfers, suede effects, nubuck effects, oily effects, spongy textures, glazed surfaces, natural aged effects, and the transfer of design ideas from natural and man-made fibre materials into ideas for leather. Most have needed new finishing products and systems to enable them to be created by the tanner.

And a final thought for the world of sport, for the world of garment leather. Water-repellence and stain resistance properties are gaining ground in importance. Leather can now be finished to meet these needs. A water-repellent leather jacket might be ideal for maintaining body temperature after strenuous sport, especially if it is cold, wet and windy. The leather industry needs to become more creative in its marketing

to encourage more interesting ways of promoting the benefits of using leather.

Personalisation and aftercare at the point of sale

Think of shoes and everyone thinks of cleaning and polishing them before wearing them. So why not think equally about the aftercare of leather garments? Why not promote this at the point of sale?

Leather aftercare products that will help the consumer to look after their leather garments can be made readily available. And products are available that will maintain the water repellence and stain resistance of a leather outer garment. Re-colourants and renovators can be provided to maintain or change the appearance, and to mask damage that may occur during wear.

If the sale of aftercare products is the way in which consumers can be encouraged to look after their leather garments during use, personalising products might be a way of encouraging them to buy. For instance, effects that create an individual or personalised look can be used with a leather jacket or a skirt. Hand modifiers can be used to modify the surface handle to personalise the touch. Perfumes can be supplied to enhance the individuality of the real leather ambience and, finishing kits for the wearer to fashion his or her own surface detail.

Just as the wearer of, say, a cotton or denim may wish to make it individual, or may wish to revitalise an older garment, so perhaps they might now be encouraged to personalise leather. And that could be a whole new world out there. ●