



Buyer's View: Loewe

The Gran Vía, Madrid's most glamorous street, boasts a rich array of international fashion houses, attracting vast numbers of tourists and locals alike. The Loewe {pronounced: loebe} store blends subtly into this setting of opulence and style yet represents a brand that means so much more to both the Madrileños and the wider Spanish public, not only due to its origins but more so to its set of values. This is because Loewe stands for elements dear to the Spanish conscience: tradition, royalty and superb quality in the country's much cherished flagship material—leather.



Gentlemen's vanity case, Loewe Archives Collection, circa 1920

It's a case of leather

Set up in 1846 by a group of local craftsmen, a modest workshop in Echegaray Street is joined in 1872 by a young German leather specialist, Enrique Loewe Roessberg; it becomes E. Loewe in 1892. At the turn of the century the house is already providing the rich and elegant of Madrid with all kinds of small leather goods, only to be granted the ultimate honour of "Supplier to the Royal Court" in 1905. The business soon starts its expansion, opening initially in Barcelona, and borrowing from the expertise of designers such as José Pérez de Rozas, a pioneer of merchandising. In the 1950s, Spain and its capital become the trendy place in which to be seen, attracting the famous and the culture-craving from around the world. This, coupled with Loewe's original inspirations at the time, reinforces the brand's perception as an avant-garde house. The 1960s see the introduction of the ready-to-wear collection, with Karl Lagerfeld, Laura Biagiotti and Giorgio Armani making their

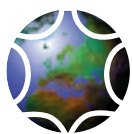
contributions. The 1970s mark the brand's international expansion and further product diversification. The business starts its co-operation with Louis Vuitton in the 1980s, a move crowned in 1996 when it is acquired by the LVMH Group in recognition of its leather expertise and product refinement.

Today, a fashion house recognised worldwide, it remains true to its leather origins. The house likes to refer to itself as a caring company that has built its name on high quality, trust and a family-like relationship with its loyal customers. With a total of 140 outlets, 26 of them in Spain, it has a significant international presence, especially in the Asia-Pacific region whose customers favour quality with a distinct personal, if not quirky, touch that many fashion houses have lost through aggressive marketing and commercial demands. A true fascination with Spain and its culture is another reason for the brand's success in the region.

The product portfolio now ranges from

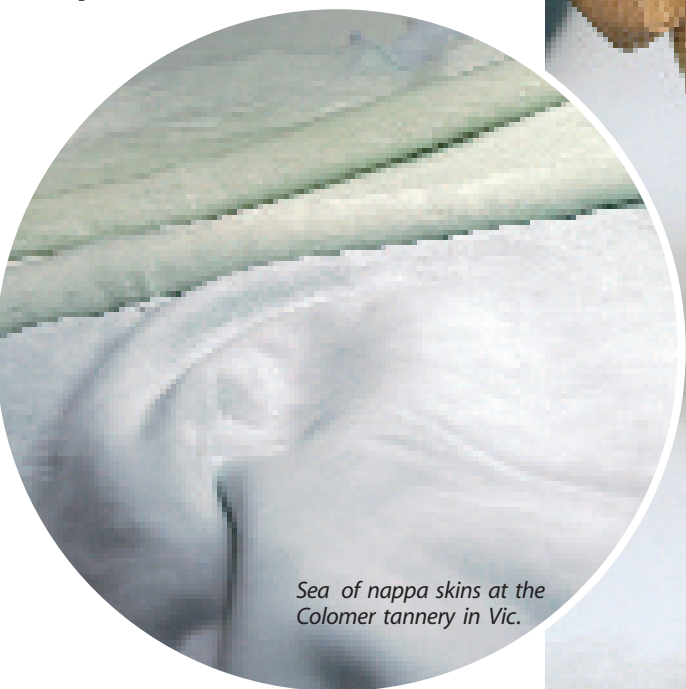
bags, still the flagship product, through footwear, headwear and other accessories, to seasonal prêt-à-porter and homewear collections. When asked whether it views itself as a leathersgoods company first and a fashion house second, Lucía Zaballa López-Niclós, its international public relations manager, replies that the two concepts cannot be separated and are equally important in the perception of the brand.

Although part of the LVMH Group, the company claims it has retained its distinctive style and independence. If anything, it believes it has benefited from the group's mission of portraying elegance and creativity through greater exposure. Becoming part of the group has not altered its production standards in any way, as it proved more than equal to the demands for quality. This quality can only be achieved through the right combination of strong design, skilled craftsmanship, efficient production processes and top quality raw materials. ➤



The art of leather

The name is synonymous with leather and its choice of the material has always been a very conscious one. Its special nappa, developed 40 years ago, and the golden suede 'anteoro' are carefully sourced and prepared in Spain. The craftsmanship and the art form of leather, developed over a 150-year period, are passed on from generation to generation with great care, and the discerning clientele expects the same unique feel and quality with every product.



Sea of nappa skins at the Colomer tannery in Vic.

Spain, renowned for the high quality of its lambskin and other leathers, from day one offered not only a raw material advantage but also an identity steeped in local history. The brand's flagship Nappa 7000, readily available in the country, is considered the queen of the leather family, yet its strict selection process means that just a mere 3% of the skin is used.

Loewe also uses a broad range of other hides and skins, including exotic leathers and fur. Materials include python, crocodile, stingray, ostrich, wolf, fish, mink, fox, reindeer, sable, marten, astrakhan and alpaca. Meeting the company's selection standards can make some of these difficult to source, especially crocodile, although supply problems can also occur with traditional materials, as was the case during the BSE crisis and Foot And Mouth outbreaks in Europe.

Like many other producers, it recommends appropriate storage for its leather products, away from heat, high humidity, dryness and extreme



Loewe's current collection boasts a rich variety of leathers: nappa jacket, reindeer suede pants and canvas/nappa/camel sandals. The "shapeless" Bahia bag is made from kip leather and suede.

temperatures. Whilst it provides no aftercare treatments itself, customers are advised to keep finished leather items away from sugar-containing liquids (alcohol, soda, etc.) and take all soiled pieces to a specialist dry cleaner.

Not surprisingly, it uses carefully selected, mainly domestic, leather suppliers and only Spanish suppliers for its lambskin. These have agreements with abattoirs to source only top quality hides and skins. The brand oversees the process and claims total control over the origins of its raw materials.

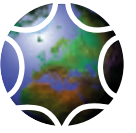
Over the years it has developed its own ways of dealing with problems associated with its raw materials. "Dealing with leather's natural irregularities started as a challenge for the house but has become Loewe's trademark," says Sylvie Grass, corporate communications manager, adding that no inferior raw material is ever used.

Leather making

The company works with six tanneries, including one in France and one in Italy, alternating orders depending on their area of specialisation and seasonal requirements. The brand does not plan to establish partnerships with other tanneries



Loewe's embossing machine dates back to the 1930s.



*The finishing stage: final trim at the tannery.
Inset: Loewe bags in the making.*

at the moment, including any in China, as it prefers to rely on Spanish and European know-how. Selection criteria, it says, change seasonally with its R&D.

One of the tanneries is based in Vic, a small town east of Barcelona renowned for its tanning tradition. It is part of the Colomer Group, which has been involved in tanning since 1792 (its vast collection of leather items can be viewed in the town's famous leather museum). The tannery, based on two separate sites—one for the soaking and dewooling of skins, and one for tanning and finishing—produces 250 lambskins per day. (We asked if the tannery is a sole provider to Loewe. Antoni Ylla-Catalá i Genís, the director, said business would always flourish if it was.)

The tannery specialises in lambskins, 90% of which are chrome-tanned to wet blue, with the remaining 10% being treated with aldehydes, aluminium salts and other chemicals to achieve wet-white skins. The skins are sorted into three quality categories at an early stage of the production process and, although a single skin cannot be tracked through the entire production process, the top quality selection is ascribed to Loewe.

The tannery uses a range of Spanish and international dye suppliers. Vegetable dyes have gradually been replaced by synthetic ones and the firm maintains its leather is also treated with dyes which do not interfere with the handle or colour uniformity of its leather. The chemicals, supplied by companies such as Bayer, BASF, ICI and TFL, are mixed automatically. Self-dissolving bags ensure minimal chemical-to-human contact on the premises.

To achieve its ultimate quality, at the end of all chemical treatments, the skins are repeatedly hand polished and glazed to heighten their sheen, softness and

flexibility, resulting in a very soft leather of 0.7 - 0.9mm substance.

According to Mr Ylla-Catalá, the tannery has a good health and safety record and a strict environmental policy. It has had its own wastewater treatment plant since 2000, capable of processing six million litres of effluent per day. The effluent is then discharged to the municipal plant for secondary treatment. An estimated 30% of water in the effluent is recycled and reused for production. Many chemicals are also recycled through the beamhouse processes and all chrome waste is transported to municipal incinerators.

The workshop

The success of the brand is not only due



to carefully selected materials and good tanning processes. The success of the final product lies in the skilled hands of the craftsmen, over 200 of whom work for Loewe today. All of these craftsmen undergo exclusive training cultivated with pride throughout the brand's existence. This know-how, it claims, is at the heart of the brand. All leather working

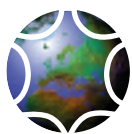
and moulding tools have been designed in its own workshops and factories, some still proving unsurpassed by more recent technologies.

The company currently owns three factories, two in Madrid and one in Barcelona, where the majority of leather accessories and ready-to-wear are made. It also co-operates with artisans in Andalusia who have a unique craftsmanship tradition. A visit to the main accessory factory in Getafe, just outside of Madrid, offers a valuable insight into the brand's production and supply processes.

The plant, which produces an average of 1,500 bags a month, and employs 180 workers, is clean, spacious and busy. The development team decodes detailed design drawings, an average of 300 different bags, suitcases, briefcases and belts every six months, from the design office in Madrid and then translates these into ➤



The Madrid men's store in Serrano Street boasts a rich collection of footwear.



prototypes. Joaquín Gardenas, in charge of the team, explained that this is where items materialise for the first time in the form of constructions made from leather and a break-resistant non-woven, known commercially as Viledon.

Here both the finished items and the leather, which have already gone through the hands of quality controllers, undergo a series of tests including those for strength, longevity, and colour fastness. Unsuitable leathers are then used for bag linings or small decorative patterns. Standards have always been stringent and long before joining the LVMH Group the factory produced small leather elements for names such as Rolls Royce. The immediate impression on handling a few nappa wallets is reminiscent of soft butter.

As with leather, Loewe has equally strict criteria for materials such as gold, silver and platinum, used frequently to adorn its products. Occasionally, pre-made elements are outsourced, such as Swarovski crystals and beads inserted into leather sections in India, or other small items, purchased from handpicked, long-standing suppliers in southern Spain, but the leather used is always its own.

Once on the production site, it is evident that the craftsmen and women are older than the remaining factory staff—experience and considerable skill is required to complete each product. The majority of the work is done by hand, with workers' attention fixed on the meticulous labour. Not only the techniques but also some of the tools recall the brand's 159-year-heritage. The embossing machine, for example, has been placing the company logo onto bags for the past 70 years. "No better machine has been produced since," Julio de la Jara Vázquez, the site manager explains.

The discerning client can have a custom-made bag, made to his or her exact requirements, bearing both the client's and the brand's name. There is a nine week waiting time and the craftsman's work takes approximately 16 hours, reflected in the average price of €3,000 per item.

The shop floor

The firm has three stores and two points of sale in Madrid. The dominant position of leather in its collections is plain to see, not only in bags and accessories but also in the wide choice of footwear, homewear and ready-to-wear, in the most beautiful and stunning variations.

During the 1970s, Italian designer

Renzo Zenhiaro worked closely with the brand and his experiments with nappa resulted in the birth of a frameless bag that not only broke the visual lines but set the trend for shapeless bags, so widely used today. The highly practical, soft, sack-like bags are very much Loewe's invention and a recurring element in the brand's collections.

A more recent creation, bound to leave a strong impression on any leather enthusiast, is the leather raffia effect. The concept derives from Spanish rural life and the popular raffia bags and baskets. Loewe has replaced raffia with intertwined leather strips, a technique developed on the Balearic Island of Majorca over 100 years ago. Next season, it plans to introduce a new type of goatskin, promising incredible softness and (stain) resistance.

The brand has two design studios producing seven collections a year, including its exclusive custom-made range. Finding a balance between traditional designs, favoured by the more conservative customer, and new and wild ideas can sometimes prove tricky. The 60:40 ratio of new to traditional has worked well for the brand, bringing a truly refreshing look to its accessories collections.

This is reflected in its recent move into accessories which combine multiple materials. Several bags in the current collection have leather edges and handles, with fabric having replaced the staple leather material. José Enrique Oña Selfa currently leads the women's ready-to-wear creative team but inspirations come from various directions, including Spain's cultural heritage.

One way in which the company proves its commitment to the higher values is through the activities of the Loewe Foundation. Established in 1988, its primary role is to support the world of arts, particularly poetry,

Raffia finished calf/kip leather bags – Spring/Summer 2005 collection.



music and design. Recently, the brand has also focused on its own heritage and history by purchasing old Loewe accessories from owners worldwide. The drive, headed by Sylvia Grass, has already proved a success and revealed interesting facts from the brand's history. The completion of its Archives Collection, which boasts items such as leather pouches, bags, vanity cases and travel trunks—some of which date back to the turn of the century, will result in the establishment of a museum.

The future is leather

Loewe seems confident about its future and its position on the international market. Despite competing with brands such as the French Hermès, it does not see a direct threat to its existence, as it believes quality, tradition and its close personal relationship with its clientele give it a strong advantage. A team of legal advisers is also on site, constantly watching over illegal copies and counterfeits.

The immediate future is to see the brand working hard to strengthen its position in the European market. Conquering the wealthy customer in the USA is another priority for the company which previously failed to win over the US market through what it describes as a mix of unfavourable circumstances and a few bad moves. Whilst materials such as silk have come to play a significant part in its image, Loewe is determined to stand by its core leather ingredient—a duty to the discerning customer and to the fine Spanish tradition. 🌐