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PROFILES DISDALE, FRAPPERI
INSIDE TRACK METRICA, H2, EDELMAN
OPEN HOUSE YACHT, JET, CLUB, HOTEL, PENTHOUSE
L'HISTOIRE STOCKWELL
CLEAR THINKING CAVELLE'S SENSES

PROS



Hide & Sleek

108 > 109

LEATHER IS AMONG OUR MOST ANCIENT FABRICS, ONE THAT HAS BEEN USED FOR CENTURIES TO MAKE CLOTHES, FURNITURE AND FASHION ACCESSORIES. IT IS A CURIOUS MATERIAL BECAUSE IT HAS A REPUTATION FOR BEING BOTH EXQUISITE, AND CHEAP AND NASTY – THINK OF SHINY BLACK BARGAIN-BASEMENT LEATHER SOFAS.

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ut when leather is the best money can buy, nothing can beat it. So how is it made and what distinguishes the good from bad? Abby Trow investigates with the help of Arthur Edelman from Edelman Leather, a family tanning business in the US set up 50 years ago to provide luxury leathers. As with so much in modern life, we don't question how it got into our shops, but merely complain about the cost. Yet when things become mass market, prices may fall, but so, invariably, does quality. And this is most definitely true with leather. So when you're next buying a leather sofa, or floor tiles – or a coat or shoes or handbags for that matter – do a little research into what sort of leather it is and ask a few questions of your sales assistant.

Vegans and vegetarians may not approve of leather, but it's probably fair to say that the majority of people around the world consider it a good product because it is natural. Leather is, in most cases, a by-product of the meat industry except for crocodiles and lizards and snakes – few cows,

sheep or pigs are killed only for their skins. But to achieve a great product, you need to start with good raw material, which is why firms such as Edelman buy hides from southern Europe – notably Italy, Switzerland and southern Germany. The animals live on small farms where they are fed, cleaned, brought in at night and are protected by wooden fences. This sort of farming means the animals' hides remain in good condition, since they aren't branded and don't get scratched by barbed wire as when there are huge herds without indoor facilities. So when experts talk about hide quality, they mean the extent to which it is unblemished from outdoor living. Not surprisingly, the best quality European hides cost around four times the price of lower quality ones. But when treated and ready for sale, the surface will have been untouched and the hide will be known as "full grain" – a leather that will become more beautiful over time, developing a rich patina particular to leather. Cheap hides are known in the trade as "top grain" —

RIGHT: NEVER OUT OF FASHION, FROM JACKETS TO ACCESSORIES AND UNDERGARMENTS, LEATHER IS NOW INCREASINGLY POPULAR AS A FLOOR COVERING.







LEFT: LEATHER FLOORING BEING METICULOUSLY LAID BY HAND LIKE A WORK OF ART

or "corrected" leather. Because the hide is blemished at the outset and the natural surface must be sanded off, leaving a surface (without the original layer and grain of the hide), which is then painted with pigments and embossed with grain resembling that of the skin which was removed or other grains. These leathers have a tendency to crack and look artificial because the surface is filled with pigment and over the years they will be more ugly, rather than more characterful. It has no leather patina and most importantly, the ability of the hide to absorb is lost. Good leather keeps you cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Curing and tanning preserves the hide for prosperity. The skill of a tanner is his huge ageless knowledge of recipes for tanning. These skills vary from tannery to tannery. Hides have to first go through a curing process before they can become useable leather, processes vary greatly depending on the type of skin used and the desired end product. But basically, once a skin is removed from the animal it must be cured immediately, a process that can involve salting, drying or refrigerating, and is then treated to smooth the grain and make the leather soft and flexible.

At this point the tanning process proper begins, which preserves the hides to make them grow more beautiful with age. There are several general tanning methods used for any type of animal skin. The most ancient of these is vegetable tanning and is a process that in different forms has been around for hundreds of years. It involves stringing hides on large frames inside huge vats and exposing them to tannin, a natural product found in the bark, wood, leaves and fruit of chestnut, oak and hemlock trees. Hides move to different bins during this long slow process, each containing a stronger solution of tannin. Vegetable tanning produces one of the most

special types of leather, one which is a little heavier and more 'grabable' than others, especially good for belts, sole leather and machinery straps. It is also an environmentally-friendly process since doesn't involve noxious substances (i.e. Chromium). Softer, stretchy leathers, such as those used for jackets, gloves and handbags, are put into a chrome tannery - the hides are first pickled in an acid and salt mixture, before being soaked in a chromium-sulphate solution. Chrome tanning is fast - it usually takes around one day - and is widely used. A third method is a combination tannage, which combines features of vegetable and chrome tanning.

Once tanned the hides enter the finishing process. Hides can be dyed pretty much any color that is required, although the natural shades - tans and black - remain the most popular, because of style. Leather takes color beautifully, but the hides must be given enough time to absorb dye through and though the hide - translucent dyes are comparable to stains. Pigmented colors, opaque, are used when hides require harder wear or are damaged. Pigments fill in damages, are opaque rather than translucent. The formulas are particular to each manufacturer and the dyes are expensive and temperamental. Aniline dyes, pure dye, need clean beautiful hides as aniline dye does not cover-up any defects, but they are not the most hardwearing and so are not suitable for products that will be subjected to heavy, heavy use. However, as they are so beautiful, people often do use this type of leather but exercise just a little care. Other hide products are suede and 'hair-on' hides, such as pony skins. They are produced using different techniques. Edelman suede, for example is made from the center cut of a hide where the fibers are equal and strong.

Okay, that's probably enough technical information. —



112

**DURABLE, RICH
AND EXOTIC,
LEATHER FLOORS
SET THE TONE
FOR A ROOM**



**VERY FEW INTERIOR
FURNISHINGS
HAVE REMAINED IN
THE SAME STYLE SINCE
FURNISHING A CAVE,
YET HIDES STILL ADORN
AN INTERIOR WITH
A BECOMING LUXURY**

But you will see that within the term 'leather' lies many different sorts of product – good, bad and indifferent. In other words, in paying your money, you take your choice. The thing to avoid, if possible, is corrected leather, which doesn't have the original grain. That said, companies like Edelman do give different looks to their leathers. For example, it offers jumbo crocodile or ostrich finishes. These are achieved by taking the impression of a real crocodile or ostrich hide, making an engraving of the pattern and applying it to a vegetable-tanned full-grain calfskin or cowhide. You can also buy antique finish and even a metallic finish leathers. Embossing on splendid full grain hides tanned to accept engravings, given a firm tannage, enhances the hide. So why choose leather, when there are so many wonderful textiles on the market, not to mention faux suedes and leather which look amazingly close to the real thing, claim to be easier to maintain, and are cheaper? Well, the real thing is always best. Leather suits both modern and contemporary interiors if you use the best quality as it always looks sophisticated, never tacky. It is, contrary to what many people think, very easy to look after (wipe it over with a damp cloth); it absorbs sound; it will last for hundreds of years. It is, in short, an inherently practical material, as well as a beautiful one. And it is comfortable, cool and tactile. Its uses in interiors are manifold. Use it to cover sofas and chairs, tables and doors, desks, chests of drawers. Use it for flooring and to cover walls. Designers today use leather and suede for an increasingly wide range of products,

including lampshades, cushions, bedspreads, blinds and leather floors. And things can get quite funky when you get into the realm on hair-on hides, such as cow skins and pony skins. Edelman dyes cow skins in vivid shades of blue, yellow, red and orange (called Pop Cow!), while it's decked out the elevators of a company in Houston with whole black and white cowhides for maximum impact. These hides are fun, but certainly not for the faint-hearted.

You may think leather flooring sounds a little risky – not to say risqué – but it's a growth area in the interior design market, as more people realize what a good long-term option it is. An Edelman leather floor tile is made from the best part of a hide and is treated with a special tannage so it is ever lasting (while remaining smooth underfoot, of course). Leather tiles can be laid in most rooms and are installed in a manner similar to ceramic tiles. Carnuba wax is used to fill the gaps between the tiles and, once down, the entire floor is waxed and buffed several times before use. Once in use any spillages can be mopped up with a cloth and normal maintenance consists of buffing once a month and an annual waxing. No other floor ages so well as leather – scratches merely contribute to a weathered look. As far as investments go, a leather floor will give you a good return for your money. And the patina after 30 years unbelievable! A final thought – although the world went metric decades ago, leather is measured in square feet. Because hides are irregular sizes, each yard of 36 ft fabric is 12 sq ft of leather, while each yard of 50ft fabric is 16 sq ft of leather. ■