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Highlights of Leather

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Highlights of Leather

There's more than appearance important in leather, says Jane Stallings

"AND THE cattlehide sailed over the goalpost, scoring the extra point!" Sounds strange, doesn't it, but the traditional pigskin that is such a boon to radio announcers' line of chatter is no more. Printed cattlehide leather, unromantic sounding as it is, has succeeded its barnyard friend as the covering for modern footballs.

You, the buying public, have been deceived. You have been buying cattlehide shoe leather for "elk" and "smoked elk," which really is not smoked at all. Your "doeskin" gloves are really made from sheep and lamb skins.

These misleading terms, however, do not necessarily camouflage poor leathers. In fact, they show to what extent the leather manufacturers have developed their industry to please us. For instance, some skins like chamois have come to mean a finish as much as a leather. Alpine antelope, or chamois, are now practically extinct. Consequently our chamois gloves and cloths are made from the flesh side of sheepskins, oiled and buffed with an emery board to give a suede finish.

Other leathers used for dress gloves are called kid, mocha leather, peccary and carpincho. Kid leather is a striking example in which the buying public deceives itself. The term "kid," as we use it, really refers to grain gloves leathers from mature goats and lambskins. This is what the manufacturers mean by the term "kid." "Cape kid," correctly confined to skins of South African hair sheepskins, is commonly applied to any imported hair sheepskins which have the natural grain retained. "French kid" gloves, likewise, are not made by French stylists at all, but refer to a special finish.

Did you know that gloves have natural oils which must have the same beauty treatment we give our faces? These leathers must be washed with baby-skin soap, inside and out, as quickly as possible. Heavy rubbing, necessitated by letting them become badly soiled before washing, may remove some of the surface finish and cause faded streaks.

After rubbing the soiled spots with a soft brush, squeeze the gloves out without wringing, rinse several times in clear water (chamois and doeskin may have a light suds rinse), and put the blocked gloves in a cool place to dry. Blowing in the fingers helps, and glazed kid must always be worked with the fingers while damp to soften them.

The term "grain," heard so often, means the outer or hair side of a leather which is split into several thicknesses. "Top grain," the best quality for luggage and straps, is cattlehide reduced to a specified thickness. Split leather, the layers under the hair side, are named according to their use, such as "flexible" (for innersoles), "glove," "waxed" (for cheap shoe uppers) and "bag and case" (finished with pyroxylin).

Split leather, not as serviceable as whole leather, is often so cleverly embossed with fine lines and hair holes that it is difficult for the consumer to detect the true nature. Sometimes the finishing material comes off from a poor product when the leather gets wet, much to the owner's chagrin.

Sweat bands in men's hats are made of "skiver," a split of sheepskin. Rawhide, much used by the pioneers, is an untamed cattlehide that has been de-haired and stuffed with grease. Some rawhide is tanned with the hair left on.

"Embossed" leathers, used for purse, bag and upper shoe leathers, have a pattern stamped on with steel rollers, usually in imitation of a grain. The term is not a mark of extra quality, as is popularly supposed.

"Crushed" leather, of which many belts are made, has had the grain preserved by rolling or smoothing. Belt leathers, to be distinguished from leather belting (used in machinery), is a sub-class of fancy leather. Cattlehide, the durable standby, fashions most women's belts, but sheep and goat skins are also used.

The best leathers come from the back of the animal between the shoulder and the tail. Lower grades are cut from the shoulder and belly. High grade leather is soft, pliable and close-grained; poor leather is loosely-fibered, flabby and inclined to break when bent. An easy way to judge the closeness of grain is to count the number of lines when the shoe is bent slightly. Sixty per inch indicate fine quality; medium has thirty per inch, and fifteen per inch is a sign of poor quality.

Grain leather of cowhide is used more widely than any other shoe leather, being durable, low in cost, attractive and capable of being finished to look like calf-skin. Good quality calf-skin is also durable and not easily scuffed. Patent leather is calf-skin which has been stretched tight and lacquered until it loses all elasticity. Because it has no pores, it is often uncomfortable for sensitive feet. Suede leather may be made from the flesh side of calf-skin, kid or split cowhide. It is not guaranteed against cracking, nor are its colors resistant to light, washing or dry cleaning.

Heels made from layers of leather wear better than those that are covered wood. There is an economy in demanding shoes with well-made leather heels, for it takes an expert shoe repairman to retip wood base French heels without splitting the wood and ruining the heel.

Alternates for leather are cheaper than good quality leather and wear better than poor quality leather. The most popular fabric is firmly-woven wool gabardine.