



## ALL ABOUT LEATHER

### LEATHER HISTORY

Like stone, wood and wool, leather is a natural product. It has been a prized commodity throughout history. All of the earlier Renaissance styles, particularly the Spanish and English favored leather upholstery. Techniques for embossing, tooling, painting and gilding leather were disseminated by Spanish craftsmen in the 16th and 17th centuries. Throughout this period, all types of furniture were covered with leather and studded with decorative nail-head patterns. In the 18th century, the art of preserving hides and tanning them into leather had become an old, respected trade. The tanning process took almost a year and was completed by coating the hides with oil and grease, then scraping and treading on them. Oxhide and calf skins were a favorite in the late Louis XIV styles, and fine goat leather was often used by Chippendale and subsequent designers. Then, as today, cattle hides were the major leather source because of their availability, strength and hide size.

### LEATHER FEATURES

From a consumer standpoint, buying a leather sofa can seem like a “no-brainer”. There are no fabric patterns to choose, simplifying decorating decisions for the design-challenged. It is also true that quality leather has properties which can make it superior to many fabrics. Consider the following:

- Leather outlasts most fabric coverings. It has an exceptionally long useful life.
- It will not tear and is half again as strong as other upholstery materials -- even along the seam lines.
- It is fire resistant and emits no toxic fumes, even when exposed to intense heat.
- Modern full grain leather products won't crack or peel.
- Quality leather stretches and retains its shape without sagging.
- It "breathes", assumes body temperature rapidly and is instantaneously comfortable.
- It resists heat and sun damage.
- Leather is a practical material, ideal for busy lifestyles. No special solvents or cleaners and no lengthy or expensive procedures are necessary for its care.
- Leather generally ages well.

On the other hand, depending on how it is used, covers promoted and sold as leather differ in how long they will last, how easy they are to clean, in their suppleness and, how effectively they can be repaired. There are big differences in leather price, quality and wearability, yet customers may have trouble evaluating how these differences correlate with desired benefits. This isn't surprising since even retail salespeople who should have this expertise, may not be conversant with the types of leather, finishes or products such as leather splits, vinyl and fabric/leather composite materials.

## **KINDS OF LEATHER**

All leather is the product of animal hides, however, these vary in their quality and the ways in which they are converted into leather. High quality leather is expensive. The raw material cost represents a substantial percentage of the total cost of manufacturing leather upholstery.

Animal hides are converted through a many step process which preserves, softens, beautifies and protects the finished product. Only a small percentage can be used to make upholstery leathers which must have large sections free from serious blemishes. Whereas it takes only a small piece of leather to make a good shoe; a sofa cushion requires a large panel of high quality.

**Top & Full Grain:** As part of the involved upholstery leather preparation process, suitable animal hides are split into a top layer (the one which had hair on it) and a thick lower layer. The top layer, also called top grain, can either be processed into full grain leather which is not buffed and sanded; or into corrected grain leather that has had the surface markings altered by buffing and sanding.

Generally, leather that has too many surface imperfections (too much character) will require correction. Full grain leather, is considered to be of greater beauty and higher quality than corrected grain leather, and so commands a higher price.

**Splits:** The lower layer may then be further split and processed into suede split or coated split leather. Coated split leather is somewhat stiffer and less durable than top grain leather. It is sometimes used to cover upholstered sides and backs that do not need to flex and move much.

## **TRIMMING COSTS**

As the popularity of leather upholstery has increased, so has the demand for less expensive options. Manufacturers may do this by covering sides and backs with less expensive splits, use bonded leather products or matching vinyl panels.

At retail, consumers may not be able to readily tell when side and back panels are not full grain, because alternative products have aesthetic properties roughly comparable with full grain leather. Even vinyl, if well matched for color and grain can fool all but a trained eye.

**Bonded Leather:** Bonded leather is made of leather pieces that are glued together, then covered with essentially a vinyl top. Bonded leather behaves much like vinyl. The only difference is that it doesn't have the same stretchability because it has leather on the backside

glued to what is essentially vinyl on the top side. At the lower end, bonded leather is being used on outside panels or maybe covering a whole piece. It can be made to look really good, but by the same token, the durability of the cover, isn't the same.

Benefit of bonded leather is that it is less expensive, but customers should do more research before they buy, and sales people should provide better information at the point of sale. If a customer asks for something durable and is told by a sales associate that an aniline leather sofa is the most durable, he or she would be correct. Top grain is strong. But should the customer have a child or pet who has an accident, sits down with sun tan lotion on their legs, or even spills a glass of water, if the top grain leather doesn't have a durable finish, it might mark, resulting in a very unhappy customer.

There are many new products coming out that use the word leather but are actually combinations of leather materials that are part leather materials and part fabric. So, a retailer might sell a material that contains ground up leather, with a polyester finish on top at a \$499 price point and the consumer walks out thinking that they've purchased a leather sofa. There's nothing wrong with buying a promotionally priced sofa, but retailers have a responsibility to tell customers who don't know the difference between full grain, bonded leather or the latest leather/fabric combination.

**Durability:** With regard to durability, full grain leather, corrected grain leather and split leather of comparable thickness have very much the same strength characteristics. Split leather usually does not have as good flex resistance, which is the reason it is used in non-flexible areas. Grain correction, or even the removal of the top grain layer does not alter the leather strength when comparing equally thick samples.

Not all top grain leathers are the same. Some manufacturers' top grain leather only weighs one to one and a half ounces per square foot while some other's can weigh three to three and a half ounces a square foot. Thicker is better. So the retailer should advise and steer the customers to leather with the appropriate finish which will depend upon the use that consumers are going to give it in their home.

If they have, three kids and run a daycare center out of their home, I'm not going to sell them a distressed waxed pull up or brushed leather. I'm going to try to explain that they need something that has a finish on it, and that a sealed leather will provide more wear.

## **CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS FOR LEATHER**

Many American consumers expect leather to be flawless; to look and clean like vinyl, but at the same time feel soft and supple. This view is largely inconsistent with the reality of leather. Even the best quality leather has flaws and natural markings. These markings on the top grain layer are analogous to fingerprints. They distinguish genuine leather from man-made materials.

## **LEATHER GRAIN CORRECTION**

As noted previously, the term top grain leather refers to leather that retains the top portion of the hide. Full grain refers to top grain leather that also retains its natural surface markings. Top grain leather that has too many surface imperfections may be processed (corrected) by

buffing/sanding the surface to remove objectionable marks. Natural looking patterned effects can then be re-introduced by coating the leather with layers of pigment finish and embossing it under heat or high pressure. This process can smooth the grain or produce unique patterned effects (ostrich, alligator, lizard, etc.). The result is known as corrected grain leather.

## LEATHER TANNING

Tanning is the process that turns an animal hide into leather. It preserves the hide, makes it softer, more pliable and durable. Today, virtually all leather is tanned with a chromium tanning process which is a type of mineral tanning. With normal use and care, modern chromium tanning techniques produce leather upholstery that can last several decades.

## LEATHER DYEING & FINISHING

Tanned leather is first colored with a penetrating dye. The dye permeates the surface of the hide giving it color, but does not cover over natural markings. The leather can then be finished in one or more coating operations, with clear or pigmented finishes that do not penetrate the surface. These final finishes provide abrasion and stain resistance as well as color enhancement. Generally, the more surface finish a leather has, the stiffer (boardier) it becomes, but tanning formula and hide quality also affect leather stiffness.

Aniline dye in common industry usage refers to any dye that penetrates into the leather, coloring it, but not coating its surface with pigment. Virtually all upholstery leathers are initially treated with a penetrating aniline dye that allows the natural grain to show through.

**Aniline Leather:** Pure aniline leather, sometimes called aniline leather, aniline finish leather or premium select leather, is a product that has a clear protective coating but no applied pigmented surface coating (finish).

This is the best quality and most expensive leather. It is made from hides having a minimum of natural markings which have not needed to be grain corrected, embossed, or coated with pigment. Natural characteristics of the hide show through and the surface is soft and supple. Moderate color variations are normal and these un-pigmented leathers tend to develop a rich patina with age. Only a small percentage of hides are good enough to be converted into pure aniline leather.

**Semi-Aniline:** The term semi-aniline leather describes full grain leather which contains only a small amount of surface coating (finish); a premium product which allows most of the natural character of the leather to show through. It is, therefore, misleading to describe a heavily finished or protected leather as being semi-aniline dyed.

Aniline or semi-aniline finished leather develop a natural patina very quickly and can stain and/or mark very easily. Oils, hair, skin, etc., even water can permanently stain these finishes if it sits there long enough, sometimes just minutes. The finish is not as durable with respect to stain-resistance as the pigmented finish. The penetrating dyes used are transparent, leaving unique features visible in the hide and the natural patina that ages the leather cover with grace over time.

**Protected Aniline:** Protected aniline leather is less expensive and more common than pure aniline or semi-aniline leather. Its coloration is more consistent and because it has been coated with protective pigments, the leather's natural markings are less noticeable. Protected leather is more heavily pigmented than semi-aniline leather and is actually easier to clean than pure aniline leather because surface pigments repel water and stains... standing up well to heavy use.

## LEATHER TRENDS

Fine leather upholstery used to be found in the dens and living rooms of only the very wealthy. The category was characterized by heavy, traditional styles and the use of strong colors such as burgundy, oxblood, burnt orange, rust, walnut, tortoise, navy and blackberry. These leathers generally had heavily glazed, shiny finishes. Massive, traditional chesterfields, tufted wing chairs, traditional saddle-arm and double bustle pub sofas characterized leather upholstered furniture styles.

Contemporary styled leather upholstery has emerged as the growth category with broad consumer appeal. Not only has the styling of upholstered pieces changed, leather now comes in a wider array of designer colors and is generally softer, more pliable and comfortable.

"The major current trend that we're seeing," notes Peter Zolferino, President of Omnia Leather, "is a swing to European contemporary on a smaller scale, very clean lines that include motion, or motorized motion. Some of the growth in contemporary is being driven by younger buyers, and some is due to a shift in the taste level of the overall marketplace."

Stephanie Lucas, President, Domicil and Brands North America, sees a shift toward contemporary as well. She says, "Stylistically we see contemporary as a growing category. And when I use the word contemporary I use it loosely. It used to be that you were either a contemporary styled person or traditional. Now what we see is the blending of design, so much so that it's possible to integrate contemporary into a kind of an eclectic style in one room."

The **BOGARI team** will gladly answer any questions about leather and leather furniture and help you make an educated decision about your upholstery purchase. Please visit us at 1010 Woods Crossing Rd, Greenville SC 29607 or call (864)254-0770. You may also visit our web site [www.bogarifurniture.com](http://www.bogarifurniture.com)