



leatherwork



An example of fine leatherwork, creating a useful and durable satchel.

what is it?

Leatherwork is making items from leather (tanned animal skin). As with many crafts, there are a number of steps from the raw material - in this case a piece of leather - to a finished item. Leather craft involves designing, cutting, and then, depending on the project, hole punching, sewing, and finishing. Additional steps could be decorating, carving and dyeing.

Leather workers often make practical things like belts, bags, shoes and book covers, as well as saddles and other horse tackle, or more artistic items such as jewellery. Leather is a hard-wearing, durable, long-lasting material. Leather thickness, flexibility and strength varies massively, depending on the animal, and where on the body each piece is from. Of course, no two skins are the same, as each animal is very different.

History: leatherwork has ancient beginnings, probably with early humans simply sewing hides together with bone needles to make clothing. Animal skin parchment was used for early writing, before paper was invented. Leather was the primary clothing material for thousands of years, before weaving was developed.

Tanning was important in ancient Egypt and Rome, and leather was used for footwear and clothes, as well as armor and shields. Throughout history, leather continued to be used for hard-wearing clothing, military equipment, belts, bags and much more. Tanning techniques actually changed very little (predominantly using tree barks) until in the 19th century with the introduction of chrome salts as a new chemical tanning agent. Modern leather is now available in all colours, and can be much softer and more supple for bags, clothing and furniture.

what are the benefits?

- It can be empowering and enjoyable to create your own items rather than buy them
- By practicing leatherwork you are keeping a traditional skill alive
- Leatherwork is a useful skill and you will be able to create, and repair many items
- Professionally-made leather items can cost a fair bit, so you can save money by making something yourself. By investing what you would have spent on a leather satchel on the tools and teaching, you will have a home-made satchel and the ability to make more
- Leather is incredibly durable if looked after properly, so you'll be avoiding the disposable culture of cheap, mass-produced items
- Leather is a beautiful, natural product that can connect you back to an ancient lineage of craftspeople and leatherworkers
- If using leather you tan yourself, you can work with a material that you have a direct connection with, produced ethically and with a very low environmental footprint

what can I do?

With a few of the right tools, and some instruction, it's possible for a beginner to create beautiful and useful leather items. There are a number of introductory leatherwork courses available, and as with any craft, learning from an expert with years of experience can help you pick up the skills and techniques much more quickly than by reading or watching videos. If that doesn't appeal, there are plenty of online guides and books to get you started.



A leatherworker's tools. Top, l-r: waxed thread and needle, wing divider, hole punch, awls. Middle, l-r: mallet, swivel knife for carving, edge slicker. Bottom, l-r: skilled hands and leather cutting knife.



Sewing leather: saddle stitch with two needles, held in place by a stitching pony.

Obtaining leather: you may want to tan your own, or buy leather. Leather is usually sold by the square foot and priced by the ounce (actually a thickness, not a weight). You can buy whole skins, or sections such as back, belly or sides. Cow hides are the most commonly sold skins.

There are two main types of leather – chrome-tanned, and vegetable-tanned. You're most likely to want vegetable-tanned leather, due to its quality, versatility, and the fact that it uses tree bark or acorns, and is therefore much more environment- and tannery-worker-friendly than the toxic mix of chemicals used in a chrome tannery.

Tools: there specialised tools for a more professional look, or for more complicated work, but the most important simple tools are:

- sharp cutting knife – or a metal craft knife
- cutting board and metal ruler
- stitch marker and stitching awl
- needles and thread – thick & blunt, as holes are pre-made with an awl
- hole punches – round for rivets and oval for belt holes
- edge beveler tool and slicker or canvas cloth and beeswax for making the edges look neat and smooth
- rawhide or copper-faced mallet

There are a number of specialist online retailers supplying leatherwork tools. You can also improvise your own.

Designing: look at other leather items to see what shapes are used and how they fit together. There are also templates available to buy online from some leatherworkers and suppliers.

Cutting: you can draw round card templates onto the leather; or draw / scratch directly onto the surface. Either way, don't forget to leave a seam allowance. The sharper your tool, the cleaner the cut. This will look neater, prevent snagging, and also save you time later when finishing the edges. Use a metal ruler to keep the blade lines straight.

Sewing: some people glue the two sides together to help hold the piece in place whilst sewing. For a neat look, each stitch is marked out and spaced evenly using a pricking tool or stitching wheel. Then holes are pierced using an awl. You can hold the work in place with a stitching pony, which makes the hole piercing and sewing simpler. This is a wooden clamp that holds the leather still while you sew, without damaging the surface. For saddle stitch (the most common stitch in leatherwork) you need two needles and strong thread. Criss-cross stitches for a strong, neat-looking finish. You can also use a sewing machine, though you need a special type - a big investment for a beginner leatherworker.

Edge finishing: it makes a real difference if edges are smooth-finished. There are a number of techniques - it involves cutting the edge at an angle, applying an edge-finishing medium (bought or made), then rubbing with various tools or cloths until smooth. You can also dye the edges so that they blend in with the surface of the leather.

Fastenings: on bags or belts for example. You can buy studs, poppers, belt buckles and more from many leatherwork suppliers.

Carving and stamping: designs and patterns can be carved or imprinted into leather. You need a few specially-designed tools or stamps.

Wet forming: by soaking leather, and stretching it over a mould as it dries, you can form it into shapes. This works well for bags and pouches.

resources

- lowimpact.org/leatherwork for more information, links & books, including:
 - Ross Cramlet, *Leathercraft for Beginners*
 - Chris Taylor, *Leatherwork: a Practical Guide*
 - Elizabeth Letcavage, *Basic Leathercrafting*
 - Geoffrey West, *Leatherwork: a Manual of Techniques*
- goldbarkleather.com/beginners-guide, beginners' guide to leatherworking
- leatherworker.net, leatherworking forum & blog

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