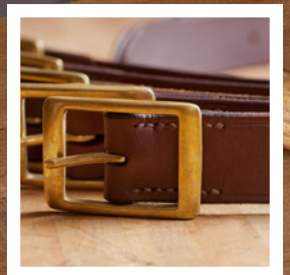




Leatherworking



Countryside Crafts: Leatherworking

Summary

The craft of working with leather has been practised since mankind first hunted animals for food and used their skins for clothing, shoes, bags, water-skins and even cooking pots. In the years which followed people fashioned leather reins to control horses, made leather scabbards for their swords and when the Romans invaded, their armies lived in leather tents as they marched across England.

In later centuries Irish monks built leather boats in which they sailed as far as Newfoundland off the North American coast. In the medieval period and during the time of the English Civil War soldiers and their horses wore armour made from leather and in the Victorian era and with the coming of the railways whole carriages were upholstered using the best quality hides. Until this time leather had been stitched by hand by saddlers, cobblers, glovers and other leatherworkers but the 19th century saw the arrival of the sewing machine which speeded up the manufacturing process considerably. At the beginning of the 20th century the first cars were being mass produced and these were fitted with leather seats made by sewing machine.

Today we still have clothes, shoes, belts, cases and handbags all made from leather. Most of these are made by machine but there is a growing number of craftsmen and –women who still make beautiful pieces in leather which are made and stitched entirely by hand.



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Case Study

Andy Bates comes from a background in English and Archaeology and has been practising the craft of traditional leatherwork for around thirty years since he made a Roman helmet with a leather lining as part of his degree. His initial efforts were greatly improved when he went to work with a saddler in order to refine his skills.

Over the years Andy worked in a variety of posts such as English lecturer, archaeologist and police officer but always whilst practising his leatherwork and occasionally making pieces for such bodies as English Heritage and the Discovery Channel.

In 2010 Andy decided to devote himself entirely to his craft and established his workshop in Hexham, Northumberland. He quickly picked up commissions such as a bag for the potter Grayson Perry and pieces for a Channel 4 historical drama. Andy then began to teach traditional leatherwork and his courses, from novice to professional, rapidly became very popular. Andy now makes pieces for TV, film, opera and museums alongside a range of belts, bags and cases and is constantly busy! He still teaches regularly and in 2013 was shortlisted for the Craft Skills Award for encouraging craft skills in the workplace.

Andy is now working with the Institute of Creative Leather Technology at Northampton University with the intention of building a traditional bark tannery in Hexham and is also liaising with the Lycee Desaix in France, whose staff train students to work for Hermes and Chanel, in order to create the highest possible standards in training for craft skills.

Andy is passionate about his craft and has been commissioned by Bloomsbury to write

the definitive book on the subject of leather and working with leather. He is motivated by a desire to reinvigorate interest in the practise of traditional crafts which can bring benefits to practitioners that extend far beyond the merely financial. He maintains the highest possible standards in all that he does and he conveys that attitude and that focus to all who train with him such that these vital skills are passed on to future generations in a format which ensures their continuity and longevity.



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Activity Idea

Instructions for making a stamped Leather Bracelet in Schools

SUGGESTED SUPPLIERS

All tools and materials are available from Le Prevo Leathers (order codes are mentioned below wherever possible)

<http://www.leprevo.co.uk/index.htm>

YOU WILL NEED

Strip of 2-3mm thick undyed, 'veg-tan' (vegetable tanned) cowhide 15cm long x 2cm wide (Order code 026).

Ends rounded and with a 5mm diameter hole punched at either end. (Only 'veg-tan' (ie entirely organic) leather can be used for this activity.)

15cm Length of 3mm wide, flat calfskin thong (order code L2).

TOOLS NEEDED

1 - For preparation of the leather bracelet strips and thong lengths (teacher).

Cutting mat

Craft Knife

Steel Rule

Rotating hole punch (referred to as 'pliers with 6 hole sizes on a wheel' order code T06)

Scissors

2 - For making the bracelets (pupil with the assistance of the teacher).

Hard, dense surface (small anvil, solid table etc)

Small bowl, small sponge, water

Rawhide, wooden or nylon mallet (wooden mallet, order code T52)

Various decorative stamps (referred to in 'Tools > Carving and Embossing Tools > Embossing Tools' as 'Embossing Stamps' and illustrations provided)

Coloured fibre-tipped pens



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STEP 1

Teacher - Place the bracelet on the hard surface. Wet the bracelet with the sponge and water (this renders it soft to receive the stamp).



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STEP 2

Pupil - Select up to three stamps to be struck onto the bracelet up to five times.

Pupil - Selects the first stamp

Teacher - Place the stamp on the bracelet as directed by pupil (usually in the centre to start). (The stamp needs to be held at its base by the teacher and pressed into the leather to avoid it 'jumping' when struck.)

Pupil is given the mallet by teacher and is invited to strike the stamp, gently at first (to permit teacher to gauge pupil's ability) then increasingly harder, until the leather has been struck six to eight times. As pupil is striking the leather, teacher will assess pupil's ability, confidence and control and will progress through a three stage disengagement process of jointly controlling the mallet with pupil as below, thereby gradually ceding control of the tool to pupil as the activity proceeds.

There are three options available for helping pupils with this activity which may be used depending on age and ability of the pupil:

STEP 2a

Teacher holds the stamp in one hand and circles the mallet's handle loosely with the fingers and thumb of their other hand, moving with the mallet as pupil strikes the leather. (This permits teacher to take hold of the mallet should pupil try to strike too vigorously.)



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STEP 2b

Teacher holds the stamp in one hand and places the other hand, palm upward, beneath the handle of the mallet. (This again permits teacher to grasp the mallet, should pupil try to strike too vigorously, but in a less assertive manner than in 2a above.)



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STEP 2c

Teacher holds the stamp in one hand, their other hand removed completely, as pupil is permitted freely to strike the stamp with the mallet.

Should pupil demonstrate good control and confidence when using the mallet, they may be permitted to hold the stamp also. (If this is the case, teacher must instruct pupil about holding the stamp at its base and pressing it firmly into the leather.)



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STEP 3

Pupils, especially if they are a younger child, may like to colour in the stamped impressions using the fibre-tipped pens.

The teacher then secures the bracelet to pupil's wrist by threading the length of thong through the two holes in the bracelet, placing this on pupil's wrist, then tying it in place. The bracelet will dry quickly and naturally.



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Points and Observations

- Using the above three-stage disengagement process permits the teacher to carry out this activity with children as young as three and those of twelve and above will derive confidence from holding both the mallet and stamp and driving the latter into the leather, much in the manner of driving a nail into wood.
- The decorative stamps (available as above at £4.65 each) depict a variety of subjects, many of which are derived from the natural world, such as cats, dogs, birds, flowers and leaves. When combined with the entirely organic nature and origin of this type of leather, their use can promote discussion about environmental issues.
- The subject of the stamp can form part of a dialogue between the pupil and teacher and can be woven into a narrative which is portrayed on the bracelet. (Eg teacher selects a 'cat' stamp; pupil asks teacher, "do you have a cat?"; pupil replies, "Yes, she's called Tabby"; and so on.) "I have used this to great effect when working with bereaved children. For example, a boy of twelve selected a particular leaf stamp to use and when gently questioned as to the reason for this, he replied hesitantly that his recently deceased father had had a tattoo in that shape and worked in woodlands. This was the first time he had spoken about his father's death to anyone and it proved to be the opening of a gateway into his previously suppressed emotions." - Andy
- At every stage, children should be praised for their successful use of the mallet, the stylish arrangement of the stamps and so on. This will increase their confidence in their manipulation of tools and materials (ie control of their environment) and in themselves for their individual selection and placement of the stamps (ie confidence that their choices in life are valid).
- The teacher's holding the stamp as pupil strikes it with the mallet is vital as it places the teacher in a position of trust in relation to the pupil and their ability. An adult placing trust in a child (effectively not to cause them physical injury) will inevitably be a huge boost to that child's self confidence. This activity also places with the child a great responsibility for teacher's wellbeing (ie the child could choose to injure teacher if they so decide). Promoting responsibility for other beings in children at an early age can only be beneficial.

"It is worth noting that the rawhide mallet is clearly softer than wood, nylon and steel and therefore less injurious to the teacher should an accident occur. However, I can say with great confidence that I have been carrying out this activity in schools for many years and with children of all ages and not once have I suffered an injury of any sort." - Andy