

Types of Leather

Different Types of Leather

Now if you are not an animal rights activist who has sworn to eschew all natural hides, and someone who decides to use only faux leather, it makes sense to know about the rudiments of the different types of leather.

Broadly speaking leather is obtained from the hide of cattle such as cow, sheep, buffalo, pig, etc., but the hides of other non-domestic animals are also used. However, the hides of animals such as deer, elk, snake, crocodile, or kangaroo are used to a lesser extent. Classification of leather is generally based on the process whereby the hide is rendered useable, or the method by which the hide is transformed into leather. There is rawhide made by scraping, stretching, and soaking in lime, there is vegetable tanned leather, which is made by using tannin, chrome tanned leather made by using chemicals such as chromium sulphate etc., brain tanned leather, synthetic, or alum tanned leathers.

These different processes give leather its distinctive qualities, colors, and finishes. The process also determines how color fast the leather is, how soft or supple, and how durable it will be. While some processes render the leather brittle and rigid, others leave it more pliable thereby determining what different uses the leather can be put to.

Now as a consumer, what one needs to know about leather is the different qualities of leather such as 'Full-grain' or 'Buffed' (corrected), 'Split' or 'Top Grain', and 'Pure Aniline' or 'Semi Aniline'.

When you want leather to actually look untreated, you should look for full-grained leather, which retains all the discolorations, or scars from injury that the animal may have sustained. These imperfections of the hide are permitted to remain and are not buffed or corrected, thereby resulting in greater resilience and durability. This is also known as natural grain, and it makes for greater comfort because it breathes better.

Hides can be of an uneven thickness, so it is sometimes 'split' in a specialized machine thereby yielding two layers of leather: top grain and split. The latter has no natural grain and is generally not durable enough to use for upholstery. This 'split' layer thereafter has an artificial layer added on top which is in turn treated to give the impression of leather grain. Suede is generally made from this split leather technique.

Now full-grain leathers are of two types or finishes as per their treatment: Aniline and Semi-aniline. Aniline is leather that has not been colored (which is done either to obtain a certain color or to disguise flaws) and this results in the product being soft, supple, and breathable. Semi-aniline leather involves a dyeing process which evens out the coloration and finish of the leather.

Some other leather related terms that merit a mention are Buckskin, Patent leather, and bonded leather. Buckskin is obtained by treating the leather with animal brains or other fats and then smoking it to prevent decay. Patent leather, distinctive high sheen leather, is usually rendered glossy by an artificial coating. Bonded leather is in reality only 10% actual leather fibers, while 90% of it is made up of manmade fiber. So these are some leather basics, which may come in useful the next time you decide to buy a leather recliner, sofa, or even a belt or a wallet!