DEFINING LEATHER: NATURAL, VERSATILE, DURABLE

Leather has been produced by humans for thousands of years and continues to serve an important role in everything from fashion and footwear to auto manufacturing and furniture upholstery. With the growing proliferation of synthetics and other products that attempt to imitate leather’s unique characteristics, it’s important to understand the properties and attributes that distinguish leather.

What is Leather?

Leather is the skin or hide of an animal with its original fibrous structure largely intact that has been treated by tanning. It is a by-product of the meat industry; the main sources of raw material for the leather industry include the hides and skins from cattle, hogs, sheep, and goats, which are reared specifically for the production of meat, wool, or dairy products. Hides and skins from other species, such as reptiles, account for less than one half of one percent of global leather production.

How is leather produced?

Hides and skins are converted into leather through the tanning process. Today, most tanners employ mineral tanning, which predominantly uses Chromium III salts, a safe mineral that is found in nature and dietary supplements; vegetable tanning, which uses extracts from plants such as soybeans; or a small minority of tanners use organic chemicals. Approximately 85% of the world’s leather is tanned with Chromium III sulphate, a mineral deemed safe by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.”

Once tanned, the leather undergoes further chemical and mechanical treatments to achieve the desired properties – often referred to as “dressing” – including changes to its color and adjustments to its thickness, before it is finished.
Natural Leather vs. Bonded Leather and Synthetics

“BONDED LEATHER,” or “RECONSTITUTED LEATHER,” is a term used to describe small pieces or shavings of leather that are pressed into place and glued together chemically, sometimes on a plastic sheet. Natural leather can be detected by the way it folds, feeling fine in some areas and coarse in others, but bonded leather appears more uniform throughout, aesthetically similar to a smooth sheet of plastic. Although bonded leather costs less than natural leather, it is not as durable. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission requires products made from “bonded leather” to bear a label.

Most other leather alternatives are made from synthetic materials and are largely petrochemical based. These products attempt to mimic, albeit unsuccessfully, leather’s quality characteristics. Consumers who purchase these alternatives are often deceived, through marketing tactics and mislabeling, into thinking these products are made from real leather. These products are typically marketed as “faux leather” or “vegan leather”, but are in fact typically a plastic material.

Why Leather?

LEATHER IS A DURABLE, VERSATILE, AND SUSTAINABLE MATERIAL that often becomes more comfortable as it ages. In contrast, synthetic materials are usually produced from unsustainable petrochemicals and lack leather’s unique properties and inimitable characteristics. Leather can be made waterproof, fire retardant, stain-proof, lightweight, and abrasion-resistant, as well as soft, warm, and colorful.

Unlike most synthetic materials, leather “breathes,” making it an ideal material for shoe and glove manufacturers. In fact, this characteristic plays a key role in foot health and hygiene, particularly for children. Its durability makes leather the first-choice material for use in sporting equipment and in automobile and furniture upholstery. Plus, leather’s beauty and comfort are undeniable, and essential reasons for its continued, prominent use in the fashion industry.

RESOURCES:

- LeatherNaturally.org
- LeatherNaturally Facts About Leather
- U.S. Sustainability Alliance
- Sustainability Alliance US Hide Skin and Leather Factsheet
- Nothing to Hide
- Leather UK