



IDENTITY LEATHER CRAFT

for people who make, mend or adapt things out of leather

The story behind Cordovan Shell Leather...

What makes this leather so special



Short Description

Shell cordovan is the name for a leather derived from the hindquarters of a horsehide. It's one of the few types of leather that consumers might know by name.

The "shell" refers to the hindquarter part of the hide once it has been split horizontally to remove the grain. The name "cordovan" derives from the city of Cordoba, and means "from Cordoba"; together the terms refer to this specific type of horse leather.

Unlike other leather, the shell is a membrane in the middle of two epidermis layers in the rear portion of a horse butt. The sizes will vary dependent upon the size of the animal. It takes approximately 1 and a half shells to make a pair of shoes.



Long Description

This leather is considered amongst the most beautiful in the world and it is most commonly made into luxury high end men's footwear.

Since creasing can lead to cracks in the leather, the tendency to ripple rather than crease helps to preserve the surface of the leather and the overall lifespan of the shoe. Furthermore, shell cordovan ages very well and develops a particularly beautiful patina over time. A well cared for pair of shoes can truly last you a lifetime.

Unusually this leather is used with the flesh (in this case the shell) side up.

The first documented use of horse leather was in 7th century Spain by the Visigoths and eventually by the Moors.

The city of Cordoba, from which shell cordovan derived its name, was a noted center for leather tanning.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, skilled craftsmen would create preciously decorated horse leathergoods such as wall hangings, trunks, shields, and armour.



Image: Meryan in Cordoba

In the middle of the century, German and Dutch tanners arrived in the US with their trade for “spiegelwahr”, which translates to “mirror ware”. The name is a reference to the fact that polished cordovan achieves a mirror-like finish. Their profession became known as “Cordwainers”.

Shell cordovan in the 19th century was a thick, tough leather prized more for its durable nature than for its good looks. It was commonly used for leather razor strops. In the early 20th century, tanners further improved the tanning techniques to make shell cordovan softer and more appropriate for shoes.

Why is shell cordovan so expensive? The high price of cordovan comes down to the low supply of hides, the high demand for them, and the long, complicated tanning process. Since horses are only raised as part of the food chain in a few places in the world, the supply of horsehides is small and unlikely to grow, contributing directly to the scarcity and high price of this type of leather. Only a small portion of the horsehide can be used and it can't be split into layers like cow leather. Tanning alone can take up to 6 months and a great deal of handwork; very few tanners have the knowledge to tan it.

One of the most famous tanneries for cordovan is Horween in the United States.



Suitable for:



Bags, clutches, purses, wallet interiors and exteriors, watch-straps, shoes, pouches, tool rolls and other small leather goods

Working with Double Tanned Calf Leather

This leather will work in much the same way as our other vegetable tanned leathers. Use a sharp knife or leather shears to cut your templates out with and give a nice clean edge to work with.

Edge Finishing – the leather can be finished in much the same way as other vegetable tanned leathers.

Wet Moulding/Hardening– this leather can be wet moulded to create sculptural detail for your projects. For best result drop into room temperature water, shape and leave to dry naturally, or placed for a maximum of five minutes in a low oven at no more than 50 degrees for a harder outcome. For a gentler moulding places into a box of dampened sawdust overnight which will increase the overall humidity of the leather.

Finishing – this leather has a polished surface shine that can be buffed up. For water-proofing use Colonnil Carbon Pro spray finish which will protect without affecting the patina.

Size Guide

Approx 1.0-1.4mm

Suitable for bag making, purses, pouches, phone cases, wallets, laptop/gadget covers, watch straps, shoes, and small leather goods

Colours – Black, Forest Green, Brown

Available in small pieces in store – individually priced



Image: Shinki Hikaku Shell Cordovan - Tochigi Veg Tan Bifold

Sources: Gentlemans Gazette, Wikipedia, Horween, www.cordovan.co (Toscana Italia)

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