The Art of Tooling Leather  KATHERINE GIRLING

The worshipful Companie of Leatherers must have prayed often the prayer of the Psalmist, “The work of our hands, establish Thou it;” for their handiwork, left to the mercy of Time the effacer, has fared marvellously well.

This broad belt and money pouch, wrought with the owner’s heraldic device, a rampant demi-griffin, holding in his claws a fleur-de-lis, was carried by father and son on two crusades. It went through the English civil wars. In six hundred years it has not faded, but has, in fact, grown richer in tone. It did not crumble, nor chip, nor break, but hardened like bone. It could not be melted, as metals were, at the King’s need. It was humble, and provoked not the wrath of the Reformer. The griffin still frowns a challenge to any one who would molest the treasure he guards, and the claws which offer the fleur-de-lis, a hostage to Setebos, are still sharp. This is the art which we modern folk forgot! In the eighteenth century, leather tooling and embossing became a lost art. Leather is easily burnt and stamped and pressed over molds. Ease and cheapness conquered beauty and individuality.

Since the days of the Romans, Western Europe had known and valued tooled leather. In the Dark Ages, craftsmen in Spain, France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands worked at the art. The Renascence saw its glory. Each country developed its particular style. Spanish work is splendid with elaborate “all-over” designs, heightened by color and gold leaf. The Germans favored embossing, for the incised outline is definite and strong.

The Italian and Celtic work is tooled. Flowing, graceful lines sink softly into the background. These workers felt that ridges, though effective, are limiting; that the most artistic work is done when the artist is left free.

Germany has known the revival of the art for fifteen years. The English have practiced it, especially in connection with bookbinding, since 1896. The art could not have been difficult to rediscover if one knows how pliable wet leather is. Without that secret of the craft, the results are marvels past finding out.

The art is so new, as yet, in America that tools must be im-
The Art of Tooling Leather

ported or made to order. All one really needs is a single punch made from a piece of No. 5 stub steel, filed flat on one side, and beveled on the other. The end is rounded and beveled. About half an inch from the end it begins to curve, till the point is bent at an angle of twenty-five degrees from the bar. It is set so that an inch and a half of steel projects, from a small cylindrical handle, three-fourths of an inch in diameter and four or five inches in length.

Leather must not be scratched. No sharp edges or points must be left on the tool.

Art dealers in England provide also a pointed tool to use in transferring the design to the leather, but any point, sharp enough to impress the leather without scratching, will answer. Rounded flattened handles of bone, or celluloid, or ivory, (one finds one on a paper-knife occasionally) are useful in working the background smooth and flat. The backgrounds may be stamped with dies cut into set patterns. This destroys the surface of the leather, catches dust, and is, like most cheap processes, uninteresting. The designs, especially for a beginner, should be simple and broad. Avoid curves which cross each other and very fine, long lines. Divide a piece of paper into diamond checks. Put in the center of one check a fleur-de-lis. Alternate a nail head or a crown with this. Transfer the figures, but not the diamonds, on to the leather. H. Jacobsen is possibly the best known craftsman, and Mrs. Alma-Tadema the best designer. They choose heraldic devices, as a rule.

In this country, suggestive work has been done by copying our native wild flowers.

Indian and negro heads would be capital, if they had not already been done to the death by the pyrography people.

I am sure that there is a future for leather workers who study Japanese designs. The simplicity; the possibility of identifying a natural object in the design; the action, the motion, given to beast, bird and fish; these are most desirable qualities for tooling. A Japanese dragon would be quite as effective in leather as in metal.

The tooling of leather for backs of books should not be attempted without consultation with the bookbinder.

Having chosen a design, transfer it to the leather. Leave a
The Art of Tooling Leather

margin of leather around the edge of your piece. Pin with thumb
sticks the leather on to a board, slipping bits of cardboard between
pin and leather. Sponge the leather. Blot it dry. Pat it. Do
not rub it, as you value its surface. Place the design on the leather
and go over the outline of the design with a pointed instrument.
Do not tear the paper, or scratch the leather with the point. Re-
movethe paper and strengthen the outline if it needs it. Take the
leather off the board and soak it for three minutes in cold water.
Experience may teach you to vary the time. The leather should be
wet enough to tool, but not spongy. When little drops of water
follow the tool, the leather is too wet. Let it dry.

In soaking, the leather should be entirely immersed, and when
taken out, blotted dry with clean blotting paper. It water marks
rather easily. Place the leather on a hard stone, slate, metal, or
wooden surface. They are named in the order of their desirability.
Hold the punch firmly as if it were a pencil with which
you meant to write. Place its beveled side on the leather at right
angles with the surface and close on to the line of the design.
Punch down with a firm, definite stroke. Repeat these little foot-
prints till the outline is marked in relief, but work them into the
background as you proceed. Do not drag the tool. Each stroke
must be distinct, yet the tool should play in all directions, so that
one impression obliterates another, till the whole background is
even and smooth. Except when working about the outline, lower
the tool so that it forms an angle of forty-five degrees. Take it far-
ther up on the handle, and use it as you would a brush, stroke softly
for a finish. If the leather dries, repeat the soaking process for a
minute. Keep the leather clean. Your little finger resting on the
leather should be protected from the leather by paper. Finger
nails make fatal prints.

The next process is to punch up the design. This is done from
the back. The leather is so held with both hands that the tool,
grasped by the fingers of the right hand, may play about under-
neath the design. This process resembles rubbing more than
punching. Firm yet soft strokes are best. Faulty lines may be
rubbed out from the back when the leather is wet, but definite up-
ward punches cannot be beaten down. Do not let the tool run over
The Art of Tooling Leather

cut the edge of the design. Perspective is possible if you punch into
prominence the near parts of the design, and leave retreating sur-
fces more flat. Bevel the edges a bit when you have flattened the
leather out on the board again. Go over the outline and the back-
ground patiently once more. Model the design as though it were
wet clay. With the point of the tool touch in fine lines like leaf
veins. Sharpen edges or repress them at your will. Learn to
know when the work is done and stop resolutely. Your tendency
will be to refine strength into weakness. Your work will lose ex-
pression. When it is dry, stain it with brown ink, or with leather
stains, or the color may be deepened by sponging it with caustic
soda. The object of staining and polishing is to prevent finger
marks from showing.

Staining is learned by experiment. Brown ink may be
rubbed over lightly and then rubbed in briskly with a fresh cloth
which also polishes. The ink may be brushed on and shaded. Or,
after the ink has been left on the leather for five or ten minutes, it
may be washed off again, restoring almost the original light leather
color. Respect the right of leather to be brown. Only an autumn
oak leaf can assume such rich brown tones.

Painted and gilded leather looks like papier mache or carved
wood painted. It no longer is the genuine material with a beauty
of its own, which the craftsman may enhance, but must not disguise.
After staining the leather, go over the modeled parts again, if they
need pointing. But after polishing do not disturb the surface.

Embossing resembles tooling except that the outline is incised
with a sharp blade, after the design has been transferred on to the
leather, while the leather is dry. Hold the knife upright in the
right hand, guide the blade with the forefinger of the left hand,
and cut the leather exactly half through.

Sponge the leather. Open the incision by dragging the punch
sidewise, through it, toward you. Tool down the background and
that side of the incision. Dampen the back of the leather and
press the design up, as in tooling. If you work the design up bold-
ly, fill the holes you leave with glue and sawdust, or with modeling
tax worked in when hands and leather are perfectly dry. Cover
the surface with tissue paper, so that it will not adhere to the table
The Art of Tooling Leather

when you lay it down. Go over the background and the design again. Point up the edges. Embossing should be crisp. Stain and polish.

The leather to use is calf skin. It should be a firm, stout piece. Its thickness depends upon how deeply you wish to work it.

If you do not know whether a piece will take the tooling, wet a sample, thrust your finger into it and note the ease with which you can pull it flat again.

Small articles: purses, bags, cases for cards, bills, or cigars, belts, or key tags, are advisable bits to begin with. Panels, screens, chair covers and even piano covers may be done. Of course the stiff leather will not drape. Purses and cases should be made up by a pocketbook maker. Send him your pieces with their margins yet uncut. His sharp knife and firm hand give precision. The edges of cases may be finished with grooved lines ruled on by the aid of a metal ruler.

Cases are lined with skiver, or satin, and may be stitched up by any leather worker who possesses a sewing machine. Do not bend the ends of cases over until you have stained the piece.

The art of tooling leather ought to commend itself to amateurs. It is not expensive. It demands a firm touch, but not great strength. It is not a noisy craft, like that of working in metal work. It is not trivial. It is a noble old art. A beginner may feel his way along with surprising satisfaction, yet in it, an artist may find scope for his highest powers.