Design and Production of Decorative Leather Articles for the Enhancement of Selected Interior Spaces in Kenya

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Abstract		Original Research Article

There has been an increasing improvement in Kenya's retail and residential interior design. Designers attribute this to the improvised and sophisticated technologies which have often been used in developing most interiors to match the global standards. While these technologies may prove expensive and unavailable to most, locally available materials like leather can be a source of wealth and create investment as well as job opportunities for Kenya's interior designers. This paper is an expression of how Kenya's interiors spaces can be enhanced through design and production of assorted decorative leather articles. The author makes a display of various leather products whose designs are inspired by cultural artefacts from various ethnic groups in Kenya.
Keywords: Decorative Leather, Artefacts, Interior Décor, Designers, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

There is potential for use of leather in interior decoration for large- and small-scale production, thus creating employment for craftsmen and artists in Kenya [1, 2]. This paper demonstrates that leather can be a good alternative material for interior decoration. Based on a research project that involved the creative use of leather in the production of articles for interior design, the paper aims at promoting and increasing the percentage of leather articles used in the interior spaces.

Information gathered by the author from UNIDO and Leather Industries of Kenya (Thika) reveal that Kenya produces a lot of leather. At least 90 per cent of this leather is exported to other countries like South Africa, Germany and Italy, which leaves only 10 per cent of the total produce for local consumption. Out of the 10 per cent, only 0.20 per cent is used for decoration of the interior spaces in Kenya. The rest goes to clothing and handbags [3, 4]. These statistics are amazing because although Kenya has a lot of leather to go around, there has not been maximum exploitation of leather in any other way than clothing and shoes.

The World Bank [4], Suhail [5] and Gilmore [6] concur that, presently, there is evidence of leather playing a secondary role as a medium in craftwork. The craftsmen decorate the leather by stitching, stamping, dyeing and tooling. The leather artisans in Kenya have concentrated their energy on utility rather than aesthetics. Most leather articles, through durable and effective in purpose, are dull and ugly [7]. Leather has been used mostly as material for upholstery of executive offices and sofa sets, working interchangeably with velvet [8]. The project, upon whose findings this paper is premised, sought to utilize locally produced leather creatively in the production of articles used to enhance interior spaces. The study was founded on an assumption that leather is durable and easily available but has been under-utilized in interior design in Kenya.

LITERATURE UNDERPINNING
Leather Industry in Modern Kenya

With the introduction of leather industries and the change of cultural values due to western influence, the use of leather in Kenya's domestic environment started changing [3]. Rituals became less as Christianity and Islam took center stage as the main religions. Musical instruments and many other leather artifacts changed with the introduction of alternatives and were only conserved in museums to die a slow death [4, 9]. Mohammed in his book, *The Economic Angle,* explains that the economic situation in Kenya has led to many other changes in the leather sector. Need for survival and the excitement of making quick money has turned the average cobbler from school designer to a craftsman. Instead of making big meaningful designer sales, he makes many petty identical sales to small timers who are equally surviving [10].

According to Odupoi, the Kenyan market is already flooded with counterfeit safari boots poorly copied and finished. The population is getting more productive and less creative. Poor leather products in Kenya have discouraged leather buyers from purchasing those [11]. This paper observes that in the days to come, overpopulation and increase in poverty, inflation and lack of jobs will drive a large mass to the *jua kali* sector to produce cheap goods such as leather, furniture and metal works that no one will buy due to need for creative design. Considering these factors, it is evident that for the leather industry to grow there is need for increased creativity in designs.

Creativity

A creative mind is that which is able to convert experience and fantasy into tangible reality [12]. According to Adiele, creativity is finite while unexploited by one who has it as an attribute and infinite when exploited. From the production of an artwork, one can tell a creative mind's product from a copier's product. It is how much inspiration has been changed to suit a circumstance [12]. Anderson [13] observes that there is always danger of repetition of works of art, in so far as craftwork is concerned given the narrowness of scope of variety. In fact, to break away from tradition is an almost impossible feat. Therefore, it is better to familiarize ourselves with what has gone on before and then let our personality, acted upon by our surroundings, express itself as freely as it is able.

According to Tabolt [14], creativity in leather started when leather was supposed as another material and manipulated as such so that possibilities are broadened and limitations lessened. Further, Opakaro [15] notes that leather's superior quality lies in its origin (the animal) and its processors. Furthering this conversation, Tremont [16] avers that leather, as a material, is worth a lot more than it looks. Many a times, the character of leather has inspired the craftsman to get out its real worth just by means of design [17, 18]. Tremont [16] further observes that accidental occurrences in the past have also directed artists into invention and creation of new leather decoration techniques just as fresco and canvas in painting. Litz [19] notes that the purpose of a piece of leather craft does not necessarily have to dictate your design on it; trial with contrasting designs could give a better unexpected finish without necessarily losing the worth of the craft work.

Leather in Interior Design

Interior design is defined as the development of indoor living and working spaces usually involving practical and aesthetic decisions. It is extremely flexible and can be thematic or historical depending on the room or building. Adapting to what already exists is a challenge which most interior decorators relish [20]. As archaeologists continue to demonstrate, human concern for improvement of the immediate environment has always been present. Apart from their religious significance, drawings on wall caves suggest that humans of pre-historic times had an eye for beautifying their surrounding by the addition of colour and natural imagery. Modern dimensions of interior design in the West began to take shape in the middle ages (AD 1100 to about AD 1400). Mostly common were wooden furniture and tapestries.

According to Opakaro [15], leather is a convenient material in interior decoration although its place has been dominated by wood and cloth decorations. Data given by Opakaro shows that 75% of the leather produced goes to the production of non-decorated shoes and leather belts, 10% left to rot, while 15% make work of art and crafts like designer shoes, handbags, baskets and hats [15]. The World Bank's [21] data on leather industry in Kenya also indicates that in an average household, leather only covers 0.2% of the total assets - 90% of this is in the shoes and belts. According to World Bank [21], not many homes have hung a leather decoration yet in every home a woman carries a leather handbag, wearing leather shoes.

Imo and Maiyo [22] note that 65% of leather produced in the leather tannery is used in production of shoes and sandals. These statistics account only for shoes made of genuine leather. The 25% of the remaining leather is used in the production of bags, belts and jackets which consume only 2% of the total leather produced. Only 5% of leather makes various items in the curio sector like laces and in sport industry like balls, gloves and pouches. However, it is not difficult to find leather items that one can use as part of dressing. This and others give reasons for need to assess new possibilities with leather, other than dressing. Presently in Kenya, leather is used in the interior to complement other materials. Leather articles are expensive and unaffordable to the common man as most of them are imported. Opakaro [15] notes that we should try to include leather as much as possible in the production of household items such as mats and quilts, curtains and hangings. He sums up by noting that the leather industry still has a lot of space in the industrial market and that leather can only get exhausted with the depletion of animals.

From the foregoing, the above discussed literature indicates that the art of using leather is not new to mankind. Leather has evolved with time to more interesting and advanced uses and continues to be popular in modern society taking a role in the fields of furniture, automobile upholstery, clothing, handbags and footwear to name a few products commonly constructed out of the durable material. This paper therefore specifically explored interior design needs that could use leather. The author combined aesthetics, creativity and leather decoration techniques for the production of articles for the enhancement of living

spaces, shopping spaces and offices, hence providing an alternative for Kenyans and other global consumers.

Leather: The Material

Leather as a medium of expression whether purely artistic, utilitarian or a harmonious combination of the two, is a versatile, durable and pleasing material [9, 6]. Leather has several qualities which make it suitable for artistic undertakings. There are many kinds of varying colours, sizes, shapes and thickness. The appearance of any given leather and sometimes its physical properties can be modified by application of dye, oil, heat or water. Some leather can drape like fabric and some are hard. Others can be flat or moulded into three dimensional forms.

Leather also has the ability to blend well with and complement many materials and a host of design possibilities. The selection of leather suitable for whatever use intended is done by considering each of the following factors: weight, type, cut and tannage, which is the system and agent with which leather is preserved. Leather types vary. There are sheep and lamb skins which can be made into fine garment leathers. Goat and kidskins are thin, dense and excellent for garment and leather gloves. Cattle hides (calf, cow and bull hides) are versatile, durable and the most commonly used in production of leather accessories.

METHODOLOGY

Three main types of leather were used in the project. These were; suede, kips and linings. These were chosen for they had the advantage of being readily available, and had also been proven by the author to take different decoration techniques well. It is important to note that kips is able to take most leather decoration techniques, hence the large percentage of its use.

1.1.
1.2. Preparation Phase

In anticipation for the main project, specific first year course units in multimedia crafts were selected as part of preparation for the task ahead. The first year course in the first semester which consisted of leather work and jewellery design contributed to the final study as follows: improvement of skills in handling of leather; creativity of design, especially for leather items, in that the design took a pragmatic direction (workable in leather); and leather decoration techniques were refined; and new techniques discovered that would be later used in the project. An example is drawing on leather using pen and ink.

In leather work unit in first year, leather items were designed, produced and exhibited at the end of the semester. The items were based on various themes. The project laid emphasis on techniques of handling leather in both design and decoration rather than thematic. In the second semester, the following units were undertaken: Drawing, Mosaic and Collage. Drawing enabled the development of instincts of imagination and creativity as well as use of lines and voids to create form. Mosaic and collage enabled the sampling of a variety of materials. In this preparatory stage, the artist studied characteristics and qualities of the various materials, some of which were later used to decorate leather in the final project e.g. the beads and metals. Before the start of the project, a background study was carried out to establish various types of leather articles in the market. Information on material culture of various ethnic groups was also collected followed by derivation of designs.

Library Work

Library work was carried out to obtain relevant documented literature on historical and modern uses of decorated leather. It also provided relevant data on current trends in the leather industry in Kenya. The author acquired literature on historical background of the various groups under study and relevant information was recorded. Libraries visited included the reference section of The National Archives, National Museum library and Moi Library, Kenyatta University. Information from magazines, journals and periodicals was also used to improve ideas on design of articles for the interior.

Field Studies

A pilot study was conducted to find out the availability of leather articles in the market and their uses. The study was also done to find out the motifs applied on leather and other types of materials used in production of items for enhancement of interior spaces. This has been broken down as follows:

a) Leather Industries

During the study, the author visited Leather Industries of Kenya situated in Thika town, to determine the following: techniques of processing leather; different types of leather and their uses; machine techniques of decorating and finishing leather; and statistics related to uses of leather in Kenya. Leather is generally classified into the following categories: suede, kips, linings and crust.

b) Furnishing Houses

The author visited Victoria Furnishers in order to find out types of materials used to make furnishings and the decorations employed on leather furnishings. Displays of furniture alongside soft furnishings and materials used for these were observed.

c) Curio Markets and Jua kali Sector

The *Maasai* curio market (located at off Kijabe Street, Nairobi) and Village market (Gigiri, Nairobi) were visited. Shops and Galleries such as African Heritage (Mombasa Road, Nairobi) and Zanzibar Curio Shop (Moi Avenue, Nairobi) were also visited to determine the quality of finished leather products. In addition, various stalls at *Kariokor* and City markets (both situated in Nairobi) were visited to see various

decoration techniques employed on different types of leather, tools, motifs and the variety of items produced. As a result, design trends were established in the leather market and the following were noted: there is lack of variety of leather articles in the Kenyan market; there is too much duplication of leather products; and leather products lack in creative design (see Plates 1, 2 & 3). These factors formed the basis upon which this study was founded. Hence, the author was faced with the task of solving the problems mentioned above as a way of injecting new life into this vital industry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following products are a result of some of the observations made from the study in various markets, houses and curio shops.

Plate 1: Leather book marks

Plate 2: Leather wallets & sandals

Plate 3: Leather belts ,wallets & coasters

National Museum

This was chosen as a resources center due to the fact that information found here is authentic and artefacts are diverse. The sections visited include the Archives, Ethnography Department and the Main Gallery. The Archives offered information in form of paintings and photographs of the people studied in their natural setting, full attire and in colour.

The Ethnography Department and the Main Gallery offered information on a wide range of cultural artefacts. The author collected photographic data, drawings and notes on diverse uses of items on display. These included pots, shields, combs, body ornaments, gourds, shields, door frames and musical instruments.

From the study, it was evident that communities had little decorated leather. However, a lot of motifs were found on artefacts, which later provided inspiration for designs. The items shown on plates 4-19 represent some of the cultural artefacts used to inspire development of design. Data from the National Museum, Nairobi was recorded through photography and recorded as follows:
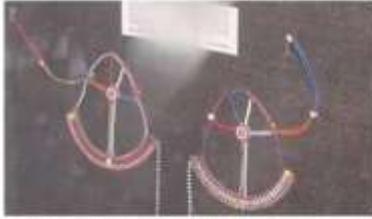
Plate 4: Earring: Maasai
Date collected: 1965
Code: UC 1967-194 Maasai
Use: Worn by young unmarried women in holes at the top of each ear.
Made of china beads.

Plate 5: Earring: Maasai
Date collected: 1967
Code: UC 1963-336 Maasai
Use: Worn by married women hanging from enlarged holes in each ear with plagues resting on the chest. Made of china beads and threaded on string made from cow neck ligaments. It's over sewn onto cow hide.
Made by women for their own use

Plate 6: Container: Maasai
Date collected: 1967
Code: UC 1969-286 Maasai
Use: Used by men to tap/collect blood from a cow's neck vein.
Made of gourd (Lagineria siceraria) with a cow hide lid and strap decorated with beads

Plate 7: Belt: Maasai
Date collected: 1970
Code UN 1972-25 Maasai
Use: worn by uncircumcised and unmarried girls.
The design is of triangles said to be a female symbol representing a cow's hoof marks.
Made by women

Plate 8: Necklace: Maasai
Date collected 1968
Code: UN 1971-310 Maasai
Use: Worn by women when they are
brides and thereafter at any important
ceremony
The china and glass beads are sewn
onto cowhide mount with threads from
ligaments of cow's neck
Made by women and girls

Plate 9: Pendant: Maasai : Worn
by married women who have
circumcised sons.

Plate 10: Necklace : Maasai
Date collected: 1960-65
Code: UC 1967-185 & 186 Maasai
Worn six at a time by uncircum-
cised girls and young married
women.
Made of china and glass beads
threaded on iron wire with cow
hide and iron wire spacers.

Plate 11: Chair : Swahili
Made from ebony and inlaid with ivory

Plate 12: Chair : Swahili
Made of wood.

Plate 13: Milk churn: Swahili
Date collected: Circa 1960
Code: UN1971-7 Swahili
Use: Used by women when making butter.
String is pulled back and forth to rotate the bar and activate the paddles made of wood.
Made by carpenters.

Plate 14: Teapot
:Swahili
Muscat type copper
tea pot

Plate 15: Comb:
Swahili
Date collected
1920-30
Code :
1071-1019b
Swahili

Plate 16: Comb
:Swahili.
Date collected:
1920- 30.
Code;
UN:1971-1029
Swahili

Plate 17: Boni
Swahili Comb
used by
women. Made
from muhowe
wood

Plate 18: Swahili
wooden comb
used by women.
Made from
African black
wood (mpingo)

Plates 15 & 16: Combs used by women made of wood (*mpingo*) the geometric designs which differ on each side are cut with a knife and carved by a wood carver.

Design of Motifs for Studio Tests and Experiments

Design is a vehicle through which the researcher exercised individual expression. Designs had to be unique, functional and within the physical capabilities in order to solve the problem. Design ideas were derived from accepted sources of inspiration namely: marine life; plant life; classical art; and material culture of the Maasai, Swahili and Luo. This stage enabled the author to explore various sources of inspiration and determine the advantages and disadvantages of designs derived from various sources.

Sketches of marine life were done and designs derived thereof. However, the sketches were not chosen for the final project because some designs were not practical on leather, given the multiple negative spaces involved. Leather is light and flexible and needs support to be firm, but when supported it becomes thick and cumbersome to handle.

Design ideas derived from plant life were used on a few samples. However, not every plant could be modified enough to fit in leather designs. Classical art inspired very complicated designs with aesthetic value. Most of these designs required support from other materials like clay and metal to function properly. Material culture (of the Maasai, Luo and Swahili) was the source of the inspiration deemed most appropriate for this project by the researcher. This was due to the realization that plant life and marine life would be too wide if combined with material culture and hence none would be exhaustively applied in derivation of designs.

This author was able to derive motifs from assorted cultural artefacts from the national museum [examples shown on fig. 1 (a) - (f)].

(a) Motif from Swahili   chair
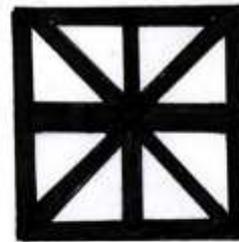
(b) Motif from Swahili musical instrument

(c) Motif from Swahili comb

(d) Motif from Maasai ear-ring

(e) Motif from Maasai necklace

(f) Motif from Swahili comb

Experiments were done to determine design possibilities on leather. Samples of works were produced on leather in order to determine the workability of designs, thereby enabling the modification of designs accordingly. This stage was quite challenging because it proved rather difficult to produce leather articles in small sizes. Decoration techniques such as moulding and incising were difficult to employ on leather. Other techniques used include tooling, stamping, appliqué, beadwork, painting/ dyeing. Each design was examined, establishing the type of leather and function of item to be produced after which the most appropriate decorative technique was used to portray the design on leather.

Development of Design and Adaptation of Motifs
This is the process where the raw design went through modification. This was done by use of repeats, distortion of designs, combination of designs, extracting parts of designs and overlapping designs in order to create new motifs and compositions [See fig. 2 (a)-(f)].

Repeat designs, composition and extracted designs

Designs derived from collected cultural artifacts were arranged to form repeat patterns found suitable. This was then transferred onto leather using decoration techniques. An example is a motif derived from patterns on Maasai necklace and coiled brass, which was then applied on leather using the stamping technique

Fig 2 (a)

Fig 2 (b) Design derived by combining sections of gourd, maasai shield and patterns from Swahili furniture.

Fig 2 (c) : Derived by combining Luo wooden spoon, part of musical instrument and section of sisal skirt.

Fig 2 (d) : Mirror repeat of design derived from Luo elder,s head dress and Maasai ornament.
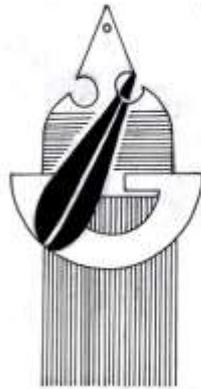

Fig 2 (e): Derived by combining Swahili comb. Maasai container and weaning device.

Fig 2 (f)

Repeats

Interesting compositions were created by combining motifs and the producing mirror repeats.

Composition

Designs were also derived by combining two or more designs to form one composition.

Extracted designs

Intricate designs mostly portrayed on Swahili wooden furniture were extracted and developed for use on leather. These were either transferred on leather as they were or were combined with other designs to make interesting compositions. An example is this design extracted from Swahili wooden furniture and combined with section of Maasai ornament. The design was applied on leather by stamping

Studio Work

Studio work involved the adaptation and transfer of designs on to leather using various decoration techniques. The following procedures were employed:

a) Scale Drawings

Production of scale drawings was done, after which templates were produced for various project pieces. These templates were very useful when cutting out and trimming leather.

b) Assembling of Materials

The main material used for this project is leather. Leather used for this project was acquired from two main sources. Kips and linings were purchased from Kariokor Market (Nairobi). Kips were mainly useful for production of items that required tooling, stamping and moulding, while from linings, thongs were cut because they are soft and flexible. Suede, processed kips and goatskins were acquired from Leather Industries of Kenya (Thika). These were mainly useful for fine works requiring use of drawing with pen and ink, beadwork and for production of lampshades. Other materials such as beads, dyes, adhesives, printing and drawing inks were obtained from shops on River road, Maasai market and bookshops. Non-leather supports made out of metal and clay used for this

project were produced by the researcher at studios and Workshops in Kenyatta University

Creative Project

Motifs obtained from selected cultural materials were modified and adopted to make objects functional and to suit different shapes and designs on leather as was found appropriate. Creativity was portrayed in: a) Production of items in relation to their functions; b) Adaptation of design; and c) Addition of accessories to enhance leather.

Function of item determined the techniques and type of leather used. For instance, placemats are used to protect surfaces and hence were produced using kips and decorated using techniques such as tooling, stamping, incising and bead work, which worked very well on kips. Leather for lampshades had to be mounted on white ivory board to help reflect light. It also had to be mounted on rounded frames therefore had to be flexible. Soft leather like suede and goatskin were found to be the most appropriate. In production of the creative project, eight main leather decoration techniques were employed. These are moulding, tooling, stamping, incising, painting/drawing, dyeing, beadwork and appliqué.

i) **Moulding**: Vegetable tanned leather is the only toolable leather and also the only mouldable leather. A template was used to trace out the shape to be moulded on moist leather (vegetable tanned

kips). Outlines of shape were then emphasized on the skin side by pressing with a flat wooden stick. Leather was then pressed outwards from the skin side using the thumb or wooden stick for small and medium size shapes. For larger items, leather was mounted on a wooden mould while moist and on drying would acquire the shape of mould. *Embossing* is close to moulding, the difference being that in embossing, patterns traced on leather are only slightly raise above the surface.

ii) **Tooling and stamping**: Both techniques required the use of moist kips. In tooling, a blunt metal tool was moved on the motif traced out on leather by holding at an angle and hitting gently with a mallet. This resulted in an engraved line, marking out the motif clearly. Stamping on the other hand involved the use of stamps either made of metal or thin plastics mounted on wood. The later was a much cheaper option for the author because more pieces were produced with less effort and much faster.

iii) **Incising**: This proved to be an interesting technique because the researcher was able to use it on any type of leather. For soft leathers such as goatskin and suede, punches and blades were used. On kips, incising had to be done using cutting knives while the leather was moist.

Soft leather like suede was mounted on paper before incising to avoid stretching as shown below:

Plate 19

Plate 20

iv) **Painting/drawing**: Acrylic colours were used to enhance the surfaces of kips. This was done when the leather was dry. To ensure that the leather took the paint well, the surface was prepared by rubbing with sand paper. Drawing was mainly employed on suede, since it was done using fine drawing pens and inks.

v) **Beadwork**: Beadwork is one of the most commonly used techniques for this creative project. This is due to the fact that beads work well on most types of leather and are available in a wide variety of colours which were useful in enhancement of leather surfaces. Beads were fixed on leather by bonding with gum for example on wall hangings.

This is because they are not handled regularly; therefore the beads would not be interfered with. Beads were also stitched on to leather using synthetic threads or fishing line. This was done for articles that would be handled regularly such as place mats and for items made using soft leather such as suede.

vi) **Appliqué:** As a technique of leather decoration, appliqué was used mainly on industry finished leathers, since these do not take all decoration techniques. Experiments were done with suede and kip on industry finished leather. Samples were also made using other coloured leather.

vii) *Finishing, preservation and storage*: After assembling parts of various project items, certain procedures were employed to ensure safety and durability of the leather products. Pigments and water base dyes were use as surface treatment on most articles then polished to shut out dirt and keep surface water proof. Colours of the dyes were then enhanced by polishing which also gave a water proof finish to the leather. Bees wax, also an excellent conditioner was rubbed onto the edges to keep them smooth. Leather products were then stored in dry area to avoid dampness which could cause staining or promote growth of mould. Articles had also to be stored away from sunlight which cause fading or darkening of leather surfaces.

Creative Project – Photographic Presentations

Plate 21: Decorative gourd: Based on moulding and beadwork techniques

Plate 22: Wall hanging: Based on moulding and beadwork techniques.

Plate 23: Decorative gourd: Based on moulding and beadwork techniques

Plate 24: Table runner: Based on beadwork and incising.

Plate 25: Wall hanging (derived from Maasai necklace): Based on beadwork and drawing techniques

Plate 26: Wall hanging: Based on beadwork and painting techniques

Plate 27: Flower pot: Based on molding and sewing techniques.

Plate 28: Wall hanging: (Derived from Swahili comb and maasai container) Based on appliqué technique

Plate29: Wall hanging: Based on beadwork and drawing techniques

Plate 30: Wall hanging: (Derived from Swahili comb and Maasai necklace) Based on appliqué techniques.

Plate 31: Lamp shade: Based on incising and drawing techniques.

Plate 32: Wall hanging Based on tooling, molding, beadwork and appliqué techniques.

CONCLUSION

Leather is available in different colours, especially industry finished leather. However, most of this coloured leather was not suitable for most of the decoration technique. Hence beads were used to enhance such leather since most of them were plain. Kips on the other hand, apart from being slightly expensive, was able to take all decoration techniques hence was the most used type of leather for this project.

Water based dyes were used to colour leather. These dyes appeared thin, but were later enhanced by application of polish. Pigment colours which are thick, opaque and give flat colour on leather were also used. Pigment colours however caused the leather to look artificial.

It was noted that moulded designs could only be further decorated by beadwork, appliqué or painting. This is because other techniques such as tooling, stamping, incising and embossing are done while leather is moist and this would have greatly affected the moulded shape, which should remain dry, especially before polishing.

Some of the designs applied on leather products required precision in order to be identical. Such articles were decorated using the stamping method.

Recommendations

Financial constraints were a hindrance in experimenting more with a wide variety of industry finished leather. The study thus recommends the adaptation of ethnic designs using more of industry finished leather to explore other design possibilities. The author was not able to acquire suitable leather printing inks, therefore recommends experimentation on leather printing.

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