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FALLING IN LOVE WITH LEATHER

Craftsmanship key to reaching consumers

ILM Deputy Editor
Tom Hogarth
interviews British
craftsman
leatherworker
Yusuf Osman
about his journey
into the leather
industry and
education.

Yusuf Osman found his way into leatherwork because of a need to create. Working as a solicitor, he tried his hand at a range of crafts and trades before discovering leatherwork and instantly falling in love with the material and the process of making leather goods. Although Osman admits it may have been the right place and right time for him to get into leatherworking, the material itself is what kept him hooked.

Osman's hobby became a full-time business, YUSSICO, when he moved into a studio at the Cockpit Arts Deptford, a workspace for designers and makers in London. In 2021, Osman was awarded the Leathersellers' Award by The Leathersellers' Company for his signature handbag.

Since then, he has been inspired by the confining nature of the pandemic to design organically shaped homeware pieces such as coasters and place mats, and is looking to expand into new areas of design in the home. For the most part, Osman uses vegetable-tanned leather sourced from Italy or France.

He said: "It's just something about the material that, whether you use leather or whether you don't use leather, whatever your opinions are on it, you can't deny that as humans we have this natural affinity to what leather is, what it represents – the sensuality of it, the smell of it, the memories of it, it's something that we can all relate to, even if we might morally, for whatever reason, object to the use of it. We have a primal connection, I think, to the material."

Longevity in use

Longevity was also a key component in Osman's decision to make leather crafting a full-time job. In a time when we are producing more things than ever, leather represents an opportunity to make one thing and use it for a lifetime. He wanted to approach production from a responsible standpoint and, although many of the largest leather-using companies in the world tout expansive sustainability campaigns, Osman questions whether a business can truly be sustainable if it is generating tons of product.



Osman won the Leathersellers' Award for his unique handbag design.

"I think I've come at it from a very different way because I'm not coming at it from the view of like an industry, I'm not coming at it from the view of how it might have to be produced on an industrial scale," he said.

"I'm definitely coming at it from the point of view of the consumer or what I would like to see and how I would like things to function. So, with everything that I design, it has to be something that is not available at the moment that I've seen, something that is different and something that people are going to cherish and keep.

"I would want that same thing to be applied to anything that I design. It should be different yet timeless, because there's no point designing something for the moment because then people want to change it."

Despite all of leather's benefits and efforts in marketing, this is a problem that has yet to be solved, but Osman has a few ideas. For one, he has looked at the idea of making modular



leathergoods, which can be adapted and changed to fit the situation and refresh themselves to keep consumers excited even if their moods and needs change.

He received inspiration from seeing items such as a bag with a clutch that could attach as a pocket or be used separately. “The problem with it, always, is that, when the things are together, I want it to be a cohesive product, not just two products packed together,” he said. “That’s the challenge. It should stand alone as one product that would appeal to everyone, especially because some people may never take it apart.”

Passing on knowledge

When Osman took his first steps into the leather crafting world, he found it quite prohibitive. Not only was there little information easily available about leather as a material and the processes behind tanning and leather goods production, but it was not easy to buy tools or even the leather itself. For Osman, the industry felt closed off in a business-to-

business bubble.

He elaborated: “In sewing and knitting, you’ve got free patterns, you’ve got patterns you can buy, obviously your fabric shops everywhere. [For leather] it just wasn’t the same. So, it took a long time for me to figure out things and even just to know about leather.

“I think this is one of the advantages of leather, but also such a hindrance because we all know what leather is, but actually the industry is so vast. There’s vegetable tanned leather but then there are so many people that make it. And then the properties of leather are so vast as well so even just to know what type of leather I need to make the kind of products that I want to make is a minefield in itself.”

Having thrown himself at the task enough times to come out the other side, Osman has developed his own avenues and found the best way to source his materials and develop his techniques through continuous trial and error. But now he is working to make getting into leatherworking easier for others.

For one, he teaches leatherwork to 11-14-year-olds at Compass School Southwark in Bermondsey, London. However, after attending a ceramics class while on holiday in New York, Osman had an epiphany about the possibilities of teaching.

He said: “Actually it was the guy who was running the class. We were chatting and he said ‘you should do this yourself’. So, it wasn’t really that I had put two and two together, but when he said that, I came back and did it straight away. And that’s what made me realise that actually something like that did not exist and I had never really thought about it – was to make luxury craftsmanship accessible.

“When I left my job, I wanted to become a maker, so I was kind of resistant to teaching because I thought, well, I didn’t leave to do teaching, I left to make stuff. But through doing it, it’s made me realise that, a) I’m really good at it, and b) it’s really important because all of those things that are important to me are things that you can really convey in a class like sustainability and craftsmanship.”

Another factor for Osman was passing on his knowledge about leather and countering the piles of misinformation. For him, a workshop was the best way to give people an opportunity to learn about leather and leather goods. He doesn’t go into every class trying to convert people to love leather and leather products but, by making all of his knowledge about the things that leather encompasses, Osman knows that his students can make their decisions with all of the information at hand.

Although he admits that anyone taking a leatherworking class is unlikely to be entirely averse to the material, he has found that the majority are unsure of the things they’ve heard about leather and have misconceptions about alternative materials. He elaborated that, when you explain to people what leather is, the breadth of the industry, exotic leathers and the truths behind vegan alternatives, it allows ▶

“Has humanity ever solved any problem by doing anything unnaturally? I don’t think so.”



YUSSICO's homeware collection was inspired by the confines of lockdown.

“If you’ve got 20 vegan bags, which are going to end up in the bin and cause problems to animals later on, how are you defining cruelty? How are you defining environmental impact?”

Getting hands on with leather gives Osman's students a chance to understand the industry.

people to make a better decision about what sustainability means to them.

“As I say to them, at the moment, there are no great alternatives to leather,” Osman said. “Is the leather industry perfect? No, but is any industry perfect? No. Does all industry have problems? Yes. Has humanity ever solved any problem by doing anything unnaturally? I don't think so. So, I think we need to go back to using natural products and trying to do them in the best way possible and make things to last.”

What does sustainability mean?

While Osman continues to operate his business from an ethical and responsible standpoint, he seems to see the wider industry as caught up in its own terminology. Even if you're doing it with all good intentions, he said that using terms like sustainability comes across as greenwashing and so he tries to avoid falling into that kind of umbrella term. As he explains, can a business call itself sustainable if it is producing hundreds or thousands of products?

“What we're ultimately doing is trying to absolve ourselves and the customer of guilt, and I don't think we should be doing that. I think we should all be thinking about our impact, rather than saying ‘this is cruelty-free, buy it’, ‘this is sustainable, buy it’. If you've got 20 bags, it's not sustainable,” he said. “If you've got 20 vegan bags, which are going to end up in the bin and cause problems to animals later on, how are you defining cruelty? How are you defining environmental impact?”

From Osman's perspective, leather is losing the battle on messaging. After all, if the majority of his

students come into his workshops with a fundamental misunderstanding of the leather industry and the material as well as fossil fuel derived vegan alternatives, what does this say about leather's efforts to communicate its benefits?

He added: “I think people are being hugely misled because, actually, the vegan alternatives are not an alternative to leather, they're an alternative to polyurethane (PU). They're an alternative to 100% PU because they are, maybe, 50% PU. And that's great but don't come for the leather industry, go after the PU industry.

“PU with alternative fibres takes the headlines, but I don't know much of the industry they represent. So, if it's 5% of the industry, then it's a huge problem because people are reading ‘apple’ in the headlines but, when it comes to the point of sale or when you go on a website like eBay and you search for ‘vegan leather iPad case’ and you buy it, you might think ‘oh, this could be apple whatever’ but actually 95% of the time, you're buying 100% PU.”

Leather's problem, Osman said, is that its developments towards better tanning, better sustainability and so on are not sexy and won't make headlines in the way that so-called “vegan leather” has. And, for him, while the majority of leather messaging seems very internally focused, the campaigns which are pushing the benefits of leather to consumers are doing it in the wrong way.

Looking to the Metcha campaign, run by Leather Naturally, he said: “That's not relatable. What is that? I look at that and I just see shiny photographs. How am I relating to that? It's a lifestyle that I'm not going to attain, it's a lifestyle that the majority of people watching it are not going to attain. It's the kind of photos we used to like before the pandemic, but nobody cares about them anymore.” Osman added that he would be happy to get involved in bettering leather messaging with a more relatable focus and is open to hearing from any tanneries or leather industry organisations. Any interested parties can get in touch by emailing hello@yussi.co

While he continues to work on high-quality leather collections that span sectors and focus on products that will see a lifetime of use,

Osman has found himself motivated to continue educating people on the realities of the leather industry and the truths of competing alternatives. While the giants of industries in fashion and automotive are caught up in their sustainability bubble, it may well be leatherworkers like him who change the perspectives of consumers when it comes to leather. I

