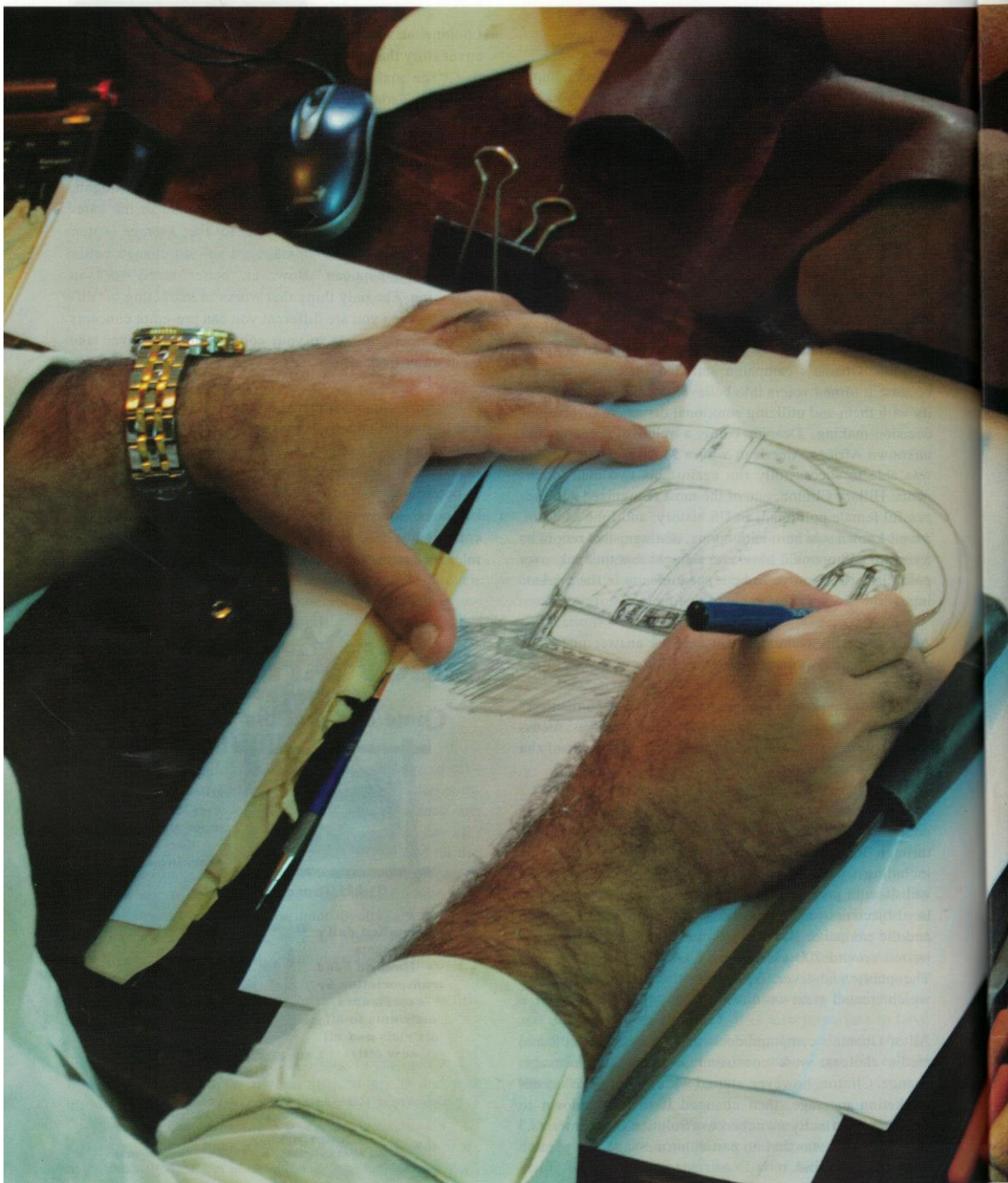




Looking at Leather

Egyptian hand-made crafts have long been in demand both locally and abroad. While pewter and ceramic products are among the most notable, leather-making and leather handicrafts are just as significant a part of Egypt's artistic tradition. In fact, Egyptian hand-made leather products are highly sought after by boutiques and personal collectors in Europe and elsewhere. The production of hand-made leather crafts entails a series of detailed steps and extensive knowledge of the material.

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Photos by Soha El Gabi



Leather is created through the tanning of animal hides. These usually come from cattle as byproducts of the meat industry. Many Egyptian leather designers use vegetable-tanned or metal-tanned leather. Designing leather often requires the use of stamps, which are tools that leave a distinct shape, design or stamp when pressed into the leather. Vegetable-tanned leather only requires wetting the surface before stamping. Metal-tanned leather, on the other hand, cannot be easily manipulated and requires heat and more strength when being stamped. It retains its color and overall appearance for many more years than vegetable-tanned leather, which often looks scratched and damaged within a short period of time. Professional designers and most consumers prefer products made from metal-tanned leather, despite its higher cost.





In order to produce a leather-based product, the raw leather must be prepared. Chemical solutions must first be applied to the raw animal hide to remove any hair or impurities. Then tanning is performed, which is the process whereby the protein of the hide is converted into a stable material that can be used for a range of applications. In Egypt, many leather factories utilize a process called "wet blue" — a type of tanning process that uses chromium and leaves the leather with a light blue coloring. After this stage, the leather undergoes crusting, a process by which it is smoothed, and sometimes thinned and colored.





The creation of a hand-made leather product begins with an artisan's sketch. The design is reproduced several times in detail, with the dimensions and measurements included, before the designer selects the ones they think will work best. Experienced leather handcraft makers will often be able to visualize what their sketch will look like in three dimensions and spot any faults in the production process early on. Once a sketch or design has been chosen, carton or metal stencils for the various pieces are created to serve as guides. Industrial scissors or leather cutters, resembling box cutters, are used, and once the various components are cut, the leather is ready for stamping and design. Some designers use their own machines or hand-made stamps — made of different metals such as brass — in order to create designs.



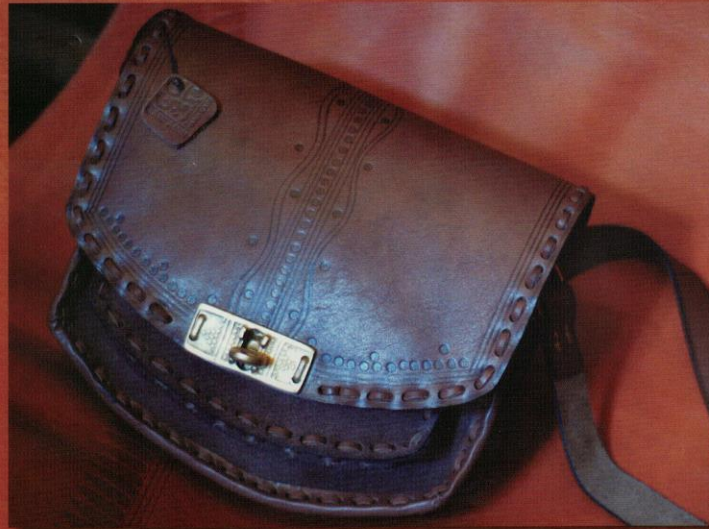


Once the various components of an item have been completed, they are assembled. Most hand-made products rely on hand-sewing to connect pieces, although sewing machines are sometimes used for the inner seams of bags and other products. If the handicraft maker chooses to attach accessories to their products, they do so at this stage. Near the end of the process, some designers choose to add varnishes, oils or creams to enhance the appearance of the leather. Some of these treatments are protective while others "hydrate" the leather itself, especially metal-tanned leather, which has a greater tendency to absorb the treatments applied to it.





Once the final touches are applied, such as attaching price tags and logos, the product is complete. Leather products are typically expensive because the production of any single hand-made item necessitates a substantial amount of wasted leather. Thus, artisans who hand-make their leather creations must order a quantity of leather that is at least one and a half times the size of the final product. It is a worthwhile investment for the local makers however, who have no shortage of customers that recognize their products' lasting value.



In Pictures



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